A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Author's warning: Longest chapter yet folks (23.5K words), be advised. I recommend taking a break in the middle; this is the size of a small novella.

Chapter 50:

Sheev Palpatine had really outdone himself with his personal *Theta*-class shuttle, in Tarkin's opinion. The degree of paranoia its multitude of upgrades suggested–scanner spoofers, sensor blinders, a hyperwave reflector dish, and more–gave the impression of a very different kind of man from the one Tarkin had known for the better part of a decade.

That impression only warped further when Aspar and Maul got into the shuttle's storage cabinets.

"What is all this?" asked Aspar, as they'd prepared to take off.

"A vial of truth potion, there," a disguised Maul said from under the hood of his cloak, which had shadowed his face far more than it should have. "Made with Sith alchemy. A few drops will have you spilling your deepest secrets."

"I suppose this was Darth Sidious's shuttle, then," said Aspar.

"Yes, you could say that." The Zabrak Sith's voice had a humorous tone to it, and Janus Greejatus, dark side adept, smirked. "These truth potions are dangerous, though. It works by making the ingester susceptible to *anything* anyone says. If you were under its effects, even a random conversation between bystanders could plant a dangerous idea so deep in your mind you'd never get it out. Ask me how I know."

"How do you know?" Tarkin asked. While he couldn't see much of Maul's face, Tarkin felt like he'd just gotten glared at.

"My master put a senator under this potion, maybe fifteen years ago. He let him go too early. The Senate Guard found him in a certain red light district four days later, convinced he had to bed every Twi'lek harlot he could find. They had to put him in an asylum, back on his home planet." Maul shook his head. "I've often wondered *what* that senator overheard, that night."

"Perhaps it's best if we don't find out," Aspar said. He'd picked up a small, stylus-like object, and was looking at it intently.

"That is a memory-eraser," Maul told him. "Be careful where you point it."

"And perhaps it's also best if we don't touch anything in here," said Greejatus. "These are things Darth Sidious kept hidden away for a reason."

Is this how I'm going to spend the next few days? Tarkin had wondered. Besides the three clone crewmen, and four of the ever-silent Red Guard, he only had Aspar, Greejatus, and Maul for company. All up to their necks in Jedi and Sith mysticism.

As it turned out, yes, that was exactly how the rest of the journey went. Tarkin, Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic, endured two whole days of the nonsense.

"…the reality is, this game of civilization we all play at is only upheld by threat of force," Aspar was saying to Maul. "Left to our own devices, we would all return to the animal state, bickering clans and tribes that couldn't even hold a continent by themselves, let alone a planet or star system. The Galactic Republic is the one entity that has risen above the animal state, and created peace. Through threat of force, of course, the only way peace is achievable."

"Are you sure you were a Jedi?" Maul asked.

"These are the conclusions born of four years of war," said Aspar. "If we want peace, if we want civilization, we must be ready to crush any who would disrupt it, without hesitation. Palpatine erred in trying to play nice with the Separatists. I think he knew this, though, because he put the Republic on track to be a much more functional state than it has been in the last millennium."

Maul turned to Greejatus, yellow eyes almost aglow beneath his hood. "And what do you think, politician?"

"I think General Aspar should have a long talk with some first year philosophy students," Greejatus said. "His political theory is simple and unformed."

"Thank you for your confidence, *former* senator," said Aspar, crossing his arms.

At length, they arrived at the location the holocron's map pointed to: the unexplored star system MR-68173, examined only by telescopy in modernity. The *Theta* shuttle was probably the first ship to visit this place in twenty-five thousand years. There was no reason to visit an unremarkable white dwarf star, and their destination, planet MR-68173B, turned out to be as unremarkable as planets came.

"I sense the dark side," Aspar said, the moment they came out of hyperspace.

"Didn't they use this *dark side* energy in their technology?" asked Tarkin.

"Yes, but…" Greejatus paused, mouth hanging open. "This is unlike anything I've ever felt."

"This is a powerful place," said Maul. "Even around Sidious, I never felt anything like this. It feels as if…" He too had to stop. All three men fidgeted and twitched. "It's like being pushed beneath water, deeper and deeper, darker and darker. But we're not drowning."

"The Force-drive could only take the Rakatans to planets rich in life," said Greejatus. "My senses are not as keen as you two, but I am feeling nothing from that planet."

"No, nothing," said Aspar.

"Nothing," agreed Maul. All their bickering had stopped; the three Force-sensitives were focused wholly on this ancient redoubt of the Infinite Empire.

I don't know if them being quiet is better or worse than their inane debates, thought Tarkin. His spine tingled, and he wasn't sure why.

"*The scanners aren't picking up any signs of life down there, my lord,*" said the pilot over intercom. "*There's no tectonic activity either. This planet is as quiet as a tomb. It'll be cold and dark down there, but safe enough without an environment suit.*"

We are *looking for a weapon,* Tarkin thought, letting the pilot's choice of words sink in. As the shuttle began to descend, the three Force-sensitives grew more restless. Tarkin thought himself high above superstition, but the primitive animal instinct deep in his brain began to wake. Flee, it told him. Flee, and never return.

But Tarkin was no animal. He pressed onward, to whatever awaited on the tomb below.

Despite Samé Sellero's assurances their discussion yesterday would be kept between them, Esera quickly discovered the entire ship knew what'd transpired. And what was worse was that Sanya had come up from Mandalore during the night. The Devaronian was waiting outside her cabin, leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

"We need to talk, Esera," she said.

"And I have nothing to say to you," Esera told her. She ignored Sanya and went to the mess hall. But Sanya wasn't easily dissuaded.

"You can't go around pulling lightsabers on people!"

"The pirate threatened me with physical violence, I responded in kind. That's all there is to it."

The rest of the crew was in the mess hall; as usual, Esera was late to breakfast after a night with little sleep. She hoped Sanya would have some tact and leave her alone in public, but no, she didn't.

"Sellero told us you were hearing voices," Sanya said, in front of the entire crew, who immediately went silent.

"We heard about what happened, Esera," said Alize. "We're worried."

"This recent behavior of yours has been troublesome," Murshida said.

"This is *not* a conversation I want to have right now," Esera told them all, gritting her teeth.

Oto and Durm gave each other a worried look, Klaud wiggled his antennae intently at his plate, Shau Meo's ears went back and he scooted closer to Zule, who also was looking anywhere but at Esera. Voyan kept eating, pretending nothing was going on. Buna kept eating too, but was obviously interested. *At least Purity's on the bridge,* thought Esera.

"Yeah, well, we're having it," said Sanya. "This is serious! Look, I get it, not sensing death must be pretty disturbing-"

"Do you really get it?" Esera asked, but the Devaronian went right on.

"But if the dark side is calling to you, you need to be even more careful than usual! And maybe it's scary, but like Yoda always said, fear leads to the dark side-"

The name *Yoda* dragged up memories that stirred Esera's blood. "Just stop talking."

"I think talking would be the most helpful thing to do in this case," Murshida said. "You are under severe stress, Captain. You should not bear these burdens alone. If you've forgotten the power you hold demands responsibility and restraint, it is time to reorient yourself. Someone like you must hold herself to a higher standard than the likes of mere pirates."

Esera turned on the Skakoan, eyes narrowed. "Easy for you to say, Mister Murshida, no one's going to dismiss you out of hand when you're that tall and that big. But me? This whole damn galaxy thinks it can push me around! Even wispy little stumps like Sellero!"

"Be that as it may, Captain-"

Her patience was used up, and she was not interested in what Murshida, the cyborg killer, had to say about responsibility and restraint. "I'm not going to sit here and be lectured by my own subordinates," said Esera. She picked up her tray of food and made for the door.

"Wait, Esera, we just want to help you," Sanya said.

"I am a stranger to you, Sanya, and you are a stranger to me. I already told you I have nothing to say to you."

Sanya stamped her foot and growled. She yelled after her: "Why are you so *immature!?"*

Esera had her breakfast alone in her cabin, and went over the day's agenda. They'd be shipping in Sellero's battle droids to the Sundari tunnels today, and setting up security in cooperation with one Ursa Wren. Esera's part in this affair was almost at an end, she just had to oversee the final twenty-four hours until the meeting began.

Some time later, her cabin door rang.

"Who is it?" Esera asked over the intercom.

"*Commander Miha Voyan.*"

She sighed, and buried her face in her hands. "What do *you* want?"

"*I told them all you wouldn't be cooperative before breakfast, or in front of the whole crew,*" he said. "*Sanya wouldn't listen, and Murshida has a very Skakoan understanding of social issues.*"

Esera pushed a button on her console, and her door opened. *What does Voyan possibly have to say?* she wondered. *Why did I even let him in?* Maybe because he was the only one who'd seen how stupid Sanya was being. Was that because he was the only other full-blood Human aboard and understood how Humans thought and felt, or was he actually on her side?

"Sit," she told him, pushing a chair out on the other side of her desk. The engineer obeyed.

"If anyone tried to hit me on my own ship, I'd deck them," Voyan said.

"I'd like to see you try. You're as wispy as Sellero," said Esera. "You two would probably flail your arms around and create a wind that carried you both away."

"My ancestors came from a warm place," Voyan said, with a shrug. "I can't help being wispy any more than you can help being…" Esera raised an eyebrow, daring him to continue. "…sturdy," he finished.

"Well, that wasn't the worst word you could have used," Esera said. She leaned back, and sighed. "You actually listen to what I have to say. I don't need to intimidate you into compliance."

"I saw what you did to those Zygerrians. And Taclai, that wretch back on Emberlene. You're a formidable woman, Captain."

If that had been an attempt at flattery, it failed. Esera curled up in her chair, tucking her chin behind her knees. This was a rotten feeling, knowing one of the people she trusted most thought of her like that. "Oh, so I *do* intimidate you… I shouldn't be surprised. You said I was dangerous. Hard to approach. No wonder you listen."

"Captain-"

"No ranks," Esera said. "I don't want to think about hierarchy and structures of power and all that stuff Zule Xiss yammers on about at dinner right now."

"Komara-"

"That makes you sound like Grievous, don't call me that." Lots of people called her Komara, actually, but right now, that impersonal distance was not what she wanted either. Deep down, she knew Sanya and Murshida were right; if the dark side was calling to her, that meant she was doing something wrong. *There is nothing more susceptible to evil than a closed heart,* Master Dooku's holocron had said. Maybe she'd been too closed-off, lately. She didn't want one of the only two people she could let her guard down with being intimidated by her.

"*Esera,*" said Voyan, "that was months ago. Are you still upset about what I said?"

"Yes, I am, *Miha,*" Esera said, scowling. "I'm tired of being written off as a nobody! But I also want people to listen to me because what I have to say might help them, not because they're afraid of me! And guess what? No one listens because no one is afraid of me, until I make it clear I can kill them any time I want! Do you know who else acts like that? Grievous! And Khan! And Aredian! And that awful Zygerrian king! I *don't* want to be like them! But acting like them is the only way I can change anything!"

Voyan's body language had changed. He leaned back too, one hand on his chin, gaze contemplative. In the Force, his mild annoyance and confusion towards her had dissipated. He grew calm, and a sense of purpose emanated from him. "I see," he said, and added nothing else. To an outsider, he might have appeared to be giving her lip service, but Esera knew his full attention was on her. She could feel it.

"I'm a Jedi. A Jedi is a guardian of life. My master always told me that. Master Dooku told me that." Dooku's name earned her a questioning look, but Esera kept going. "The first time I ever killed someone, a real, living, thinking, feeling being, was on Brentaal IV. It was… horrible. Can you imagine what it's like, feeling someone's life-force drain away, feeling their inner light go out, feeling their soul vanish into-" Esera took a deep breath. "No, you can't. Be glad you can't. I was sick for days. Not physically, but inside. My master said it was good to feel that way. It should break your heart to kill, he told me. And it did. It really did."

"Was this that story you told, on *Invisible Hand*?" asked Voyan.

"No, that was Tarhassan, a little bit later. And I was physically sick, that time. I left that out." Esera couldn't even muster the shame to blush, admitting that. The slaughterhouse that was Tarhassan, a minor planet with no real value except being somewhat close to Mimban, had shown her the true face of war. They hadn't even managed to take it, in the end. Esera and her master had to leave their Loyalist rear guard to die before the landing zone got overrun. "You know, maybe that's where it started. Tarhassan. I thought to myself, how could anything be worse than that? Well, little did I know that Umbara was coming up in a year and a half… that was worse. We'd kill their soldiers, their resistance would ambush our convoys, we'd strike their hideouts in the cities, they'd behead our men with vibroknives and put the videos out on the shadowfeeds, we'd do public executions of known terrorists, they'd hit the clone barracks with a mutagen weapon. Have you ever seen a clone turn into a pile of meat before your eyes?"

Voyan shook his head. His usual stony impassiveness had given way to concern, but in the Force, he just felt sad. Esera didn't like that.

"After my master and I left Umbara, I noticed I felt… numbed. I'd been feeling it for a while, I think, but I started to notice it then. Killing living beings was just easier than it had been. Much easier. I barely felt it. And… and…" She knew what came after Umbara. The single worst moment in her entire life. One she'd never spoken of to anyone alive, because it was so stupid, meaningless, and pointless... And it'd been her fault. Esera took a shuddering breath, she tried to steady her trembling hands, and ignore the wetness suddenly building in her eyes. "When my master died, it felt… inconsequential. Like swatting a

fly. A tiny, tiny, light in the Force going out, one you'd never miss. How could that be? My master was- was-" She choked up, and closed her eyes. She hid her face behind her knees, and breathed in, and out. *He was the most important person in my life, someone I looked up to more than anyone else, someone irreplaceable, someone I failed as badly as someone could fail another, he's only dead because I was too useless to do anything-*

No interruption came from Voyan. He sat in his chair, relaxed, but silent. Grievous would have told her to stop being so sentimental, if he'd been there. But there were no words of judgment, no scolding for feelings. So Esera found the courage to go on.

"The numbness made my own master's death feel as meaningless," she said, her voice gaining some semblance of steadiness. "Then there was Shumavar, and then I left the Republic, and I met Grievous, you know the story from there. I killed a Neimoidian soldier on Raxus, during the coup. That was the first time I'd ever felt nothing at all when a living being died. Maybe, I told myself, maybe it's because I was the one doing the killing. But then Kentaroh killed those two Sundari men the other day, and… nothing. I'm a guardian of life, but a life can be extinguished right in front of me and I can't even sense it. In what universe does that make sense, Miha?"

"None I can think of," Voyan said.

Esera poked her head up, and let her lightsaber fall out of her jacket sleeve, into her hand. She put it on the desk between them. "Sellero asked me what I'd ever lost, right before I pulled this on her. I warned her not to push me any further, but she pushed. This whole galaxy sees a stupid, weak, useless little girl when they look at me. But with *this,* I'm suddenly–what did you call me?–ah, *formidable.*" Esera tapped a finger on the leaf-carved hilt. "With *this,* I became numb to death. Even the deaths of those closest to me. Do you see why I'm so upset?"

"I see, Esera," said Voyan, nodding slowly. "I see."

"No one listens. No one ever does, until they know what I am. I don't want to be a killer. But it's getting easier and easier to be one. All I wanted was a little respect. A little decency. A little understanding. That's just too hard for some people. Most people. I have to use *this*, to get them to listen." Esera tapped the lightsaber hilt again. "Even you, Miha."

"Even me," Voyan admitted.

A quiet moment passed between them. Esera slowed her breathing, her heart calmed, her hands relaxed. And a weight seemed to have left her shoulders. A small weight, but noticeable. She'd said things she'd never said aloud before. Things were not *better*, she felt, but they were *clearer*. How long had she needed to just tell someone what was on her mind? Voyan had even said as much back on Zeltros. It'd taken her until Emberlene to even act on that… Again, the urge to say something came to her, prompted by memories of that planet.

"You helped me keep my temper in check, on Emberlene. You weren't there with Sellero yesterday. I think you could have talked me down from my… outburst. I know, you shouldn't be looking over my shoulder like I'm a little kid or something, that's not what I need or want. But you see things I can't. I don't know how normal people think, I don't understand how they act. Probably because… I never had a real friend until I met you."

There it was again, that feeling of sadness Voyan kept off his face.

"Okay, that sounded pathetic, but it's true!" Esera blurted. "Don't feel sorry for me!"

"Mind-readers!" said Voyan, rolling his eyes.

"You're being very unresponsive, you know."

"What do you want me to say?" Voyan asked. "Maybe: *'Wow that sucks, how about you give me that lasersword and drop me off back home since you don't want to use it?*'" He shook his head. "You said it yourself. I see things differently than you. I would have given anything to be as feared as you are, on Lirra. I think it's great, when someone listens to you because they know you could pulverize them! But I think that way because I'm a Human and a male one at that, and my people's culture rejected violence but-"

When he didn't go on, Esera raised an eyebrow.

"Never mind, this is about you, not me," Voyan said, with a wave of his hand. "We see things differently. We think differently. That's biological fact. That's cultural fact. The advice I can give, the solutions I have, they wouldn't help you. So I just listened. It's all I could do."

Esera sensed he wasn't saying all that was on his mind, he'd held something back. She squinted at him, and resisted the urge to look inside his head. For a few moments, she reflected. What had she wanted out of this conversation? She hadn't started it, Voyan had sought her out, he'd been the one to put himself here. He'd come to her with the sole intent of getting her to babble on about everything bothering her. And she felt better for it. A whole litany of remarks about Zule Xiss suddenly came to her mind, regarding how that Zeltron had grown so close to Voyan, but… *No, Voyan tried to help me. He* did *help me. I'm not immature.*

"Thank you," she said. "It means a lot to me, that you care enough to… do whatever kind of therapy session this is."

"The oldest kind of therapy, Esera. Xim's warriors exchanged tales of hardship and woe on their voyages home from campaigns. It took months, even years, to cross sectors back then. They had all the time in the Galaxy to come to terms with what they'd been through. For us, in this age? Sometimes we don't even have days."

"Yeah, isn't that the truth…" Esera's voice trembled again. She'd gotten the order to deploy to Shumavar before her master had even been cremated. Maybe it was time to talk about that, too. But someone down on Mandalore had other ideas, because a transmission request came in at that moment. "Um, I have to take this call, so we best get back to work. Thank you again, Commander Voyan."

"Just doing my part, Captain," said Voyan, standing up. He gave her a salute, and made his way out.

Esera glared at the beeping communicator.

Asajj was not surprised that the list of each day's disasters had grown considerably smaller since the various factions had agreed to a meeting. Mysteriously, the majority of bombings, shootouts, kidnappings, and even plain thefts had dropped precipitously in a few days. Everyone was holding their peace… except for Gar Saxon's Deathwatch. The city hospital had a ward full of wounded today, on their account.

"They came at us from the side and ahead," a Mandalorian man from the Wren clan, covered in bacta patches, mumbled. His left arm ended in a stump. "Hit the first speeder and the last, caught the rest of us in the kill zone. Classic ambush tactics. It was Saxon's people, it had to be."

"I haven't the slightest doubt," said Asajj. "Remind me again why Kryze just hasn't killed him? He's sitting in his cell, right where she left him."

"Politics are beyond me, Ventress, I'm just a warrior," said the Mandolorian. "My loyalty is to Ursa Wren, not Bo-Katan Kryze. We're out there every day getting shot up for her. It'd better be worth it."

"I'll see what we can do about Saxon. Take it easy today but Wren will want you back on duty tomorrow. We can't spare anyone now that Potkin has ordered the clones back to their barracks."

"Great," groaned the Mandalorian. He waved his stump at her. "By the time this is done I'll be more machine than man…"

"Life sucks, then you die," Asajj told him.

"Always the cheerful one, aren't you?"

"Don't you know it!"

Dealing with the wounded wasn't Asajj's idea of being useful. But she was being paid to help with security and there wasn't much else she could do other than take down information. Once she was out of the hospital, she tried to get in contact with Tano, but the line was busy. She'd hardly made it two more steps before her communicator was ringing again.

"What do you want?" she asked, holding it in front of her. The small hologram of a certain clone captain appeared.

"Rude as usual, Ventress," said the clone. "Commander Tano's busy, trying to get a call through to that Seppie destroyer. ComFast seems to be having connection issues. So I'm coming to you with this information."

"Oh?"

"General Potkin's up to something," said Rex, lowering his voice. He looked over his shoulder, on his end of the transmission. "The base just moved up to condition three."

"I never had Kaminoans filling my head with military jargon, Rex," Asajj told him, rolling her eyes.

"Condition three is *prepare for battle*. Condition two is *stand by for battle,* condition one is *battle stations*, which means-"

"Okay, I get it. Potkin's telling you guys to get ready. Do you have any idea of why?" asked Asajj. Already, she knew the answer. Potkin must have gotten wind of the meeting tomorrow. The chances were, the Jedi was going to crash the little party in the Sundari undercity. With that pirate woman's battle droids, it'd be a slaughter… in the Mandalorians' favor. But she wasn't telling Rex that. He was an ally, but not a friend.

"We haven't heard much," said Rex. "But if I had to guess, Potkin's reached a deal with one of the Deathwatch factions. Condition three is set only if we expect to be fighting within twenty-four hours. Whatever's going down, it's going down soon."

"Duly noted. I'll pass this onto Tano and Kryze. Keep your head down, Rex, I'd hate to have to chop it off," Asajj said, with a humorless smirk.

"I'd like to see you try," said Rex, cutting the transmission.

I saw this one coming, Asajj thought. Shadday Potkin did not seem like the kind of woman to be told no. Of course she'd make a move on Kryze if she thought it'd help her get her way. The question was: how far was Potkin willing to go? If Rex was right, that meant she'd made contact with one of the Mandalorian faction leaders. There were only three Asajj knew of in Sundari: Bo-Katan Kryze, who wouldn't betray herself; Ursa Wren, who was too straight-laced to betray Kryze; and Gar Saxon, Maul's imprisoned Deathwatch puppet. It was obvious who the culprit was.

"Saxon's plotting something with Potkin," Asajj told Kryze that evening, in the throne room.

"I wouldn't put it past him," Kryze said. "He's the only one not invited to this gathering, after all."

"And, you know, he's a ruthless murderer," said Tano.

"Captain Rex in the clone army told me their base has gone to condition three. Potkin's making her move tomorrow." Asajj looked around at the impassive Mandalorian faces. "I can't help but note none of you seem particularly concerned."

Tano shrugged. "We went to condition three all the time, back when I was with the Jedi. It just means be prepared; it's not a guarantee of anything"

"If it comes to a fight with the clones, we'll crush them," said Ursa Wren. "They were 'trained' by that worthless exile Jango Fett. There's nothing to fear."

"They had no trouble taking down the Deathwatch," Tano muttered.

Kryze held up her hand, silencing the room. "Regardless of what the Republic and Saxon might be up to, this meeting is proceeding as planned. I've reviewed Sellero's droids; the tunnels below Sundari are perfect for them. And if the droids can't handle it, Ursa Wren's warriors can."

"I've never known Mandalorians to put faith in droids," said Ventress.

"The GX1 is no ordinary droid. These things put those Separatist Baktoid toys to shame. True, they lack the warrior spirit. But in situations like this, they have their uses."

You're quite the pragmatist, Kryze, thought Ventress. She had no faith in any droid whatsoever. Not since her humiliation by Yoda in front of the Toydarian king- *All in the past! Think of the now!*

"Then everything proceeds as planned," said Wren. "We'll be ready for anything."

Asajj caught Tano on her way out of the throne room. "I have a bad feeling about this," she whispered.

"Relax. If something happens, Rex will tip us off, just like he warned you today," Tano said.

"I don't take chances," said Asajj. "I'm having *Banshee* fueled up and prepped for takeoff tonight. You know what dock she's at. If things go bad and you want a way off-planet, you'll know where to find me."

The Togruta girl smiled, and put her hand over her heart. "I'm so touched you're thinking of me, Ventress."

"Yeah, yeah, you help me make good money, don't get too excited."

At last, the day had come. *Whirlwind* descended to Sundari, with Esera's usual retinue aboard: Mister Harak Murshida, Miss Purity Alpha, and her two magnaguards on seemingly-permanent loan from Grievous. Princess Samé Sellero and her goons were already down there, as were Rahab and Baruch of Tenau and a few more of their warriors.

"You are tense," Murshida said.

"Yes, I am," said Esera. She was still rankled that Ahsoka Tano had managed to interrupt her conversation with one of her only friends in the Galaxy. And now Voyan was back to being chief engineer of *Encounter,* fighting the endless battle to keep the service-worn destroyer fit for battle. In fact Esera was reading his latest report as she let *Whirlwind* fly herself. There were microfissures in the lateral supports aft of the reactor. Not a critical problem, but something she'd have to deal with eventually. Apparently, they were months old, they must have formed during the black hole incident, and been exacerbated by the maneuvering above Zeltros… and Esera ramming the ship into the star destroyer's ventral hangar. *Yeah, not my brightest moment, but we needed to win,* she thought. Hopefully today would go better. And Zeltros had still ended well for everyone involved, except Marko Riberre, who'd gotten exactly what he deserved.

"Do you sense something I don't?" asked Murshida, dragging her back to the present.

Esera took a moment to reach out with the Force, through the murky shadow of the dark side that seemed present wherever she went. There was danger out there, she could feel it; faint and nebulous, shrouded by the dark side. It could have been the star destroyer in orbit for all she knew.

"Something's out there. I don't know what," she said. "It's not helpful, so I wasn't saying anything."

"I will be on my highest alert," Murshida said.

Is this what Voyan meant about Skakoan socializing or whatever? He'd completely missed *why* she was tense. Skakoans must have been more different from Humans than Esera had initially thought. Murshida was still the first one she'd ever been around up close for any amount of time.

"I do not feel anything either," said Purity.

"No, of course you don't, you're not a-" Esera stopped before she said *a living being*, and took the biodroid's feelings into account. "You're not in touch with the Force, Purity. You can't feel anything."

"I will let you know if I do," Purity said, earnest and serious as always. There was something ominous to her words, which reminded Esera of small children back at the Temple commenting matter-of-factly about monsters under their beds or shadowy roommates living in their closets. The idea of a droid touching the Force was just as creepy.

Whirlwind landed at one of the landing pads sticking out from Sundari's protective dome, a structure that dwarfed even Ado Eemon's pyramidal palace on Caramm. *You could fit all of Veldevale in there,* thought Esera, recalling her home town on Stalimur. *And a few kilometers of the space elevator tether too!* Sundari rose like a pearly-grey, perfectly hemispherical mountain from the glaring white glassy waste stretching out forever around it. Tens of millions of people lived inside that single dome. Were there even ten million people on all of Stalimur?

Waiting at the platform was Ursa Wren herself, Lady Kryze's chief captain, with half a dozen of her clan's warriors. Wren was a severe woman, lithe in figure and stern in face. She had a no-nonsense air about her, which Esera could appreciate.

"Welcome to Sundari, Lady Komara," said Wren, with a nod of her head just polite enough to get by. "If you'll follow us, we'll escort you down below."

"Lead on," said Esera. Her magnaguards were eyed warily by the Mandalorians, and Murshida and Purity both drew second glances, too.

As they took an elevator down, down, down through the dome's superstructure, Wren cleared her throat. "What will you do if this falls through, Lady Komara?" she asked.

"Leave, I guess," said Esera. "I'll slag the beskar mines from orbit, though."

"That was the answer I expected. And I can't help but wonder if it'd be better if it did end that way. Beskar is a part of our identity, but I feel it'd be better for no one to have it than for it to fall into the hands of outsiders," Wren said. "That droid abomination you follow will not be getting any from us."

"He's watching, you know."

Wren looked around the elevator cabin, before her eyes settled on the magnaguards. "An unsettling thought, Lady Komara."

"You get used to it."

They got off on ground level, and took another, shabbier elevator down into the tunnels, where a labyrinth of water, steam, plasma, gas, sewage pipes and their service passageways awaited. It was dark, dim, damp, and claustrophobic. Every place looked the same as any other. Esera was quietly thankful she had droids with her, who could find their way out on inertial navigation alone. They rounded one corner, and came face to face with one of Sellero's machines.

The GX1 was a huge droid, standing close to three meters tall, its cylindrical head coming within centimeters of the ceiling. Its enormous limbs could have demolished the duracrete walls, its three stubby fingers were each as big around as Esera's arm, its digitigrade legs promised speed beyond its bulk. Sellero's GX-1s were painted in dark grey, with a red and white line slashing diagonally over the chest. The three photoreceptors, one central and a small auxiliary on either side, glowed gold in the gloom. Esera noticed it had a smaller pair of arms tucked up against its chest, almost certainly for fine manipulation.

"How lovely!" Purity chirped. The GX1 stared back, silent and motionless.

"Not as lovely as you, honey," said one of Sellero's pirates, a brown-haired Human boy who couldn't have been any older than Esera, if even that. He flashed a grin at Purity, whose cheeks lit up pink.

"Captain Komara, it is happening again," she murmured, raising her hands to her face.

"Stop embarrassing the guests, Judow," said Ursa Wren. "What are you doing on the perimeter, anyway? Sellero wanted her people on the inner ring of defense."

"Just some last minute checks," Judow said.

"Oh?" Wren's eyebrow raised, suspicion boiled in the Force. "Not planning anything clever, are you?"

"No way, lady!" Judow shook his head, and Esera felt his honesty. "The droids already have their mission, transmitted by physical uplink from *Pride*'s computer to their processors. Once they're unplugged, they can't be reprogrammed or go rogue or anything. You *need* a hard connection to mess with them. They're unhackable if they're not plugged into the computer."

"Reassuring." Wren waved for him to follow, as they went deeper into the tunnels.

"He's telling the truth," Esera told her. She wasn't surprised when that failed to ingratiate her with Judow.

"Hey, wait a second," he said, catching up to her. "You're the crazy lady who almost killed the Princess!"

Esera scowled, and turned her nose up. "Your princess tried to strike me on my own ship. Grievous would have slain her where she stood, and I'm frankly surprised he hasn't berated me yet that I didn't. Sellero is lucky to be alive." *Where is Grievous, anyway? I haven't heard from him in two days…*

"Lady Komara is in the right. I would never suffer a stranger to insult me so in my own home," said Wren.

"Everyone's a critic…" Judow sighed.

They came to a large chamber, the purpose of which escaped Esera. A cistern for stormwater, perhaps? With no vegetation left on this side of the planet, floods were apparently common. Inside were over a dozen Mandalorian leaders, with their own retinues. Among them were Bo-Katan Kryze, Rook Kast, Rahab of Tenau, Kentaroh of Dusala, and others she didn't know the names of. Representatives from the clans of Skirata, Awaud, Carid, and more had come. The Mandalorians gathered in a circle, with Kryze at the head. With Ursa Wren once more among them, their meeting could begin.

"You have shown great trust in coming here, esteemed chieftains and representatives," Kryze said to them. "I thank you for the honor you all show me. Many of you have doubted my claims. Some of you have refused them. And I have denounced many of you in turn. But there is a far greater adversary looming over us. The Republic's occupation of our planet continues unabated, their companies have come to take our Beskar, Mandalore's influence and power is at its lowest ebb in history. We all can change that, here, today…"

Esera tuned out her speech, and looked at who else was around. There was Samé Sellero nearby, with Lelin, Judow, and Trapper Wolf of all people. What was he doing here? And there was Ahsoka Tano, and- Esera's breath caught. *Asajj Ventress,* she thought. The last time she'd seen Ventress, she'd been speeding away down an Ibisa highway with a stunned Miha Voyan as her unwilling passenger. But today, Miha Voyan was safely hundreds of kilometers above them, in low orbit.

"Moment of truth, huh?" asked Tano, crossing the gap between the two groups.

"Let's hope Kryze can pull it off," said Esera. She was still mildly upset that Tano had interrupted her time with her engineer.

"I believe in her. So, uh… what exactly did you do to get that pirate so scared of you?"

They both glanced over at Sellero, who glared back.

"Some people don't listen unless you make them listen," said Esera. "What did you say about us, Purity?"

"Your kind has not progressed from the age of caves and wheels as much as you would like to think, Captain," Purity said. "Many beings can only be coerced by threat of force. They will not compromise or cooperate, even when it is in their best interests to do so."

"Pride always comes before the fall, doesn't it?" Tano looked off into space, wistfulness on her face, but Esera could not figure out why. "The dark side will take advantage of that. You can't let that happen, Komara. I really wouldn't enjoy hurting you again."

You just had to make that comment, thought Esera, fighting to keep a frown away. "Speaking of dark side, how is Ventress doing? Mister Murshida here said he felt quite a dark presence in her, last time they met."

"Fury, hate, fear," said Murshida. "The banes of us all."

"Ventress is… Ventress." Tano shrugged.

"Spooky, if you ask me," said a new voice. They turned, and found Trapper Wolf had joined them. "Sorry for interrupting, it's just, well, being near *Asajj Ventress* is… uncomfortable."

"Even more than a crazy lady?" Esera asked, her voice as flat as her stare.

"Um…" Wolf looked away and blushed. "The Princess is known to exaggerate. I take everything she says with a grain of salt."

"That's a lot of salt to be carrying around, young man," Murshida said.

What did he mean by this? wondered Esera.

"Mister Wolf, what has brought you down to this place?" Purity asked. "I had been told you were a pilot, but you seem to do everything."

"I had some technical training back home; the Princess wanted me and Judow looking over the droids. Just in case any mechanical problems occurred." Wolf looked over his shoulder, as the golden glow of a GX1's photoreceptors passed in the darkness of the tunnel beyond the chamber. "Never thought I'd be working on one of *those*, though…"

"Gatalenta has a great education system, I heard," said Tano.

Wolf chuckled, sounding nervous. "Well, I mean, it's nice, yeah…" Just being around Ahsoka Tano seemed to have Trapper Wolf on edge, Esera saw. It was like looking into a mirror, spiritually. Many times had someone's physical presence flustered her. She could sympathize about what it was like to be a young person in a serious situation battling unserious thoughts.

"My engineer really didn't like the fact you're from Gatalenta," said Esera, trying to give him something else to think about. "Do you have any idea why?"

"No…?" Wolf shook his head, scratching at his beard. "Why would anyone hate Gatalenta? It's the butt of a lot of jokes in the Outer Rim apparently, but we've never fought in any wars, or anything... But this is the first time I've heard of us being *disliked*."

"It's because Gatalenta has a puritan reputation, kid." Asajj Ventress had joined them, strolling up with all the predatory grace of a nexu. "People out there tend to be less conservative in their values." Her mere presence had rendered Wolf unable to speak. Esera didn't feel much like speaking either.

"Oh, fine," huffed another voice. "If you're all over there I'll be there too." Samé Sellero and her two escorts joined the small crowd. "This place gives me the creeps."

"It's cleaner than most places, Princess," Lelin said. The pale, thin man kept a serious face, and his eyes constantly scanned the entrances to the chamber.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the Skakoan beast," said Ventress, looking up at Murshida. "You're not here for a rematch, are you?"

"No," said Murshida. "I defeated you thoroughly. There is no need for a rematch."

That got a few laughs, and everyone calmed in the Force, to Esera's relief. Only Ventress was left scowling. "Yeah, with help," she muttered.

The Mandalorians talked amongst each other, and what they said was of little interest to a woman like Esera, who had much bigger concerns than tribal politics on one planet.

"What a piece of junk!" Sanya screamed, hitting her hydrospanner on the busted pipe. "Who designed this stupid ship!? Why does nothing work when I need it to!?"

"Take it easy," said Zule, hands raised. "This is an old ship. Things break."

"But they keep breaking! And now my plants aren't going to get their water!"

"They will, they will!" Zule took the hydrospanner from her. "Let me work on it for a bit. Go take this report to Commander Voyan for me, maybe a walk will calm you down."

"Fine," sighed Sanya.

Hydroponics was deep in the middle of *Encounter*, as shielded from radiation and hull breaches as it could be. The bridge was far to the prow of the ship, and getting there on foot took the better part of ten minutes. Here and there, conduits were patched over, bulkheads were repaired but not repainted, deck panels were simply missing, and lights flickered. *Encounter* had had a long service before the war began; the war had pushed her even harder, especially once Esera and Voyan had taken charge. Voyan had done a lot to restore the ship, Zule said, but Esera's 'brilliant' schemes of flying down the throats of singularities, ramming star destroyers, and trying to fight entire fleets alone had taken their toll. Sanya warily eyed the series of sealed-off hatches that lead to areas damaged during the battle over Emberlene. *I hate space battles,* she thought. *They're even worse than battles on the ground. At least on the ground I can get away… there's nowhere to run out here.*

The bridge was quiet, only Voyan and Shau were there, plus the droids. The Human was in the captain's chair, datapad in hand, while Shau diligently manned the navigator's post, ears pointed in alertness towards the stars outside the windows. Sanya didn't have the heart to tell him he wouldn't hear anything through the vacuum of space.

"Hey, Voyan," said Sanya, waving the datastick Zule had given her. "Got a report on a broken water pipe in hydroponics. Zule's working on it."

"Lovely," Voyan said. He took the stick. "That's what, the fourth time since you came aboard?"

"Yes!" Sanya put her hands on her hips. "Are you going to do something about it, *chief engineer?*"

"As long as you have a watering can, it's low priority," said Voyan. "I'm more concerned about the capacitors I've got Oto and Klaud working on. Those things have been giving Captain Komara and I trouble since the very beginning."

"Why don't you lug around that watering can, see how fun that is after the seventeenth time?"

"If you want help, get Buna," said Voyan. "She just lounges in her cabin reading Barabel romance novels."

Shau's ears twitched, and Sanya bit back a guffaw. "I never would have guessed," she said.

"It's true. Did you-"

"Commander," a blue-marked battle droid said suddenly, "we've detected one of the Republic's spy satellites."

Voyan sat straight up, and put his datapad aside. "Why?" he asked.

"There was a large burst of encrypted transmission to the city of Sundari, sir."

"That can't be good," Voyan growled. "Get me a line to the Captain."

The droid tapped at his control panel, and a line did open. But the only sound that came was static, for a moment, until the hologram logo of the holonet provider appeared.

"*We are unable to connect you to the holonet at this moment,*" said a cheery female voice that sounded as canned as its corporate niceties. "*ComFast apologizes for this issue; our service workers are investigating the cause. Please be patient and try again in a few minutes. Thank you for using ComFast, the Outer Rim's most trusted holonet provider!*"

"What a load of crap," said Sanya.

"She sounded nice to me…" Shau said, ears drooping.

Sanya put a hand on his shoulder. "People lie, out here in space," she told him.

"Cut the chatter." Voyan was out of the captain's chair, and at the communications console, standing over the droid. "There's no way ComFast is having an outage just moments after that star destroyer bounced a transmission down to Sundari. They're up to something. What is the *Tector* doing?"

"Our spy satellites indicate it is holding steady, opposite of us," said a droid.

"Well, they haven't moved yet…" Voyan put his hand on his chin. "I don't like being out of contact with the surface. Ask *Pride of Sellero* if they can get through."

The droid typed out a message, and moments later, they had their answer: *Pride* had lost contact in the middle of an important transmission. Sanya gulped, and her heart started beating faster. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said.

"Yeah, me too." Voyan keyed up the internal comms. "Durm, Oto, Klaud, Xiss, finish up what you're doing within five minutes and report to damage control stations. We may have a situation here."

"*What's going on, Commander?*" Durm's rough voice asked.

"That star destroyer sent a message to the surface and now communications are out with the planet. You don't need a degree in hyperdrive theory to figure this one out."

"*Very funny, Commander,*" Oto's voice said.

"Be ready for anything. Voyan out." The engineer turned on Shau. "Ensign, bring up those jumps you calculated. I want you able to get us out of here the moment I give the word."

"Yes, sir," said Shau. His face had gone pale.

"What about me?" asked Sanya.

"Unless you've learned to compute a firing solution better than these droids, I want you off this bridge, Sanya. You're a liability up here."

"Right…" *Please not another space battle,* Sanya thought, as a tremble ran through her. She made to leave, but Voyan called after her:

"Actually, check in on Alize, let her know what's going on. I don't want her getting whacked by a pan if things suddenly get hot."

"Alright. I can do that." *I see right through this, Voyan,* thought Sanya. He was trying to make her feel useful, so she couldn't focus on her fear. It'd probably work.

The Mandalorian deliberations dragged on, and on. It came as no surprise to Esera that pirates eventually broke out a pack of cards, sat down on the duracrete, and began gambling. Princess, Lelin, Wolf, Judow, all were equal at the metaphorical table. After a few rounds, they dealt in Tano too, while a curious Purity observed.

"What a fascinating game," Purity reported to Esera. "They lie to each other about what cards they have. It seems to be an exercise in facial muscle control, as well as other bodily responses to dishonesty. My father would approve."

"I'm sure Khan would," said Esera.

"Oh, to be young again," sighed Murshida. "I lost more money than I care to admit in such frivolous pursuits. But I was with comrades, and we made many fond memories."

"Do you want to join them?" Esera asked him.

"They would not let me. They cannot see my face, it would not be fair." Murshida shook his head, and leaned on his vibro-weapon. "Such a sad thing, to be faceless." Esera busied herself with counting how many times the GX1s on patrol passed by the chamber entrance. She wasn't the only one who was nervous. Asajj Ventress came and went from the chamber, heading out to check on the perimeter every few minutes.

A while later, the game was interrupted when Samé Sellero received a transmission from her ship. The small hologram of Crede appeared, looking equal parts distraught and furious. "*Princess, it's those two junker rats! They've*-" Crede's visage warped and distorted, his voice turned to static for several seconds, before turning to normal, "-*going rogue, you need to get*-" and then he flickered and distorted again, and this time vanished. Static lasted a moment more, before the ringed letter *cresh* of ComFast appeared. An impossibly upbeat woman's voice spoke:

"*We are unable to connect you to the holonet at this moment. ComFast apologizes for this issue; our service workers are investigating the cause. Please be patient and try again in a few minutes. Thank you for using ComFast, the Outer Rim's most trusted holonet provider!*"

"Yeah, right," Sellero grumbled, rolling her eyes. "He said something about junker rats. Judow, what are those oaf friends of yours up to this time? Meecha and Bondo are causing trouble for Crede again."

"I have no idea, Princess, I swear," said Judow. "Why does everyone always think I'm up to no good?"

"You keep poor company," Trapper Wolf said.

"Meecha and Bondo have gone rogue?" Lelin guessed. "That's what it sounded like. Good luck, Crede, I can't imagine what those two going rogue looks like. Probably a lot of really annoying pranks!"

"I didn't even know they went back to the ship," Judow muttered.

Rogue? Esera thought. While the pirates laughed at the idea of the two junker rats, whoever they were, being chased around *Pride of Sellero* by Crede, Esera just frowned. Why did the word *rogue* have such a sinister feeling to it? A bell rang on the edge of her mind, but whenever she reached for it, it slipped away. The endless dull Mandalorian politicking had turned her brain to sludge.

But as fate would have it, that politicking didn't have much longer to last. The Mandalorians quieted down, and stepped back to form a circle, with Kryze at its head.

"Then it is agreed?" Ursa Wren asked, her voice echoing in the chamber.

"On my honor, it is agreed," said Kentaroh of Dusala.

"On my honor, it is agreed," said Rahab of Tenau.

"On my honor, it is agreed…"

The oaths went on, until all present had given them, even Rook Kast, who looked like she'd barely managed to spit the words out. *What did Kryze give up for that?* Esera wondered.

"On my honor, it is agreed," said Ursa Wren. She turned to the red-haired woman, and kneeled. All others knelt with her. "Hail, Bo-Katan Kryze, ruler of Mandalore!"

"*Hail, Bo-Katan Kryze, ruler of Mandalore!*" the others shouted.

"I heard your pledges, honored chieftains," Kryze said, hand raised. While her face stayed straight, an immense amount of smug energy radiated from her, enough to make Esera shake her head. Kryze launched into another speech that Esera decided not to listen to. She'd done her part.

"That's it, then," Tano said, coming up next to her. "We did it. Peace on Mandalore."

"Yeah, we did," said Esera. She took a deep breath. "I can't believe it. We actually did it. Well, Kryze did it, we just pushed it along."

"We did." A moment of silence passed, before Tano offered her hand.

Esera swallowed her pride, and shook it. "Job well done," she said.

"You got that right!"

Tension began to melt out of Esera, her shoulders felt looser and lighter. "Well, time to get out of here. I'm sure Grievous has another crisis for me to stop."

"I always thought he was more of a crisis-starting guy," said Tano.

"He is, that's why I'm the one who stops them," Esera said.

The lights, already dim, flickered. Kryze stopped her speech, and looked up. "That's pacifist engineering for you," she remarked, earning a few laughs from the other Mandalorians.

Then they flickered again, and went out. They did not come on. In seconds, the Mandalorians had their flashlights on.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Rook Kast. "Are you betraying us, Kryze?"

"In case you haven't noticed, Kast, I'm still right here with you. Whatever's happening, I'm as much in the dark as you are. It's probably just a power outage."

Esera's magnaguards had turned on their spotlights, but Murshida's goggles had infrared filters and Purity's artificial eyes could see just fine in the current lighting conditions. The pirates got out their own flashlights, and clustered together, card game forgotten.

"Damn these ComFast fools," Sellero hissed, mashing buttons on her communicator. The ringed *cresh* just floated, slowly spinning in a circle, with a little message of *Unable to connect* under it. She looked up, and breathed in deeply. "Komara, can you contact your ship?"

Esera looked at Purity, who raised a hand to her ear. She shook her head. "I am getting the same message the Princess is getting," she said. Rahab exited the Mandalorian crowd, and made her way to them.

"Hey, Captain, what's going on?" she asked.

"No idea, we can't raise our ships," said Esera. The Tenau ship was still parked near the Dusala village, she remembered. "Can you call yours?"

"Hey, Kasi," Rahab said into her communicator.

A hologram appeared of the alien woman. "*Hello, Rahab. Have the negotiations gone well?*"

"Uh, yeah, they went great, actually. Everything's all sorted out, we can come home! But, um, we're having some communications problems with orbit. Can you call *Encounter*?"

"*Sure thing,*" said Kasi, turning to something out of the projection's range. "*That's odd,*" she said, "*I'm getting a message from ComFast that the connection is out.*"

"That doesn't make sense," said Rahab. "There's no reason we should be able to talk to you on the other side of the planet while we can't reach *Encounter,* which is supposed to be over us for another ten minutes."

"*You're right,*" Kasi said, nodding. "*It seems to me that ComFast doesn't want us talking to anyone in orbit, but surface to surface transmissions work just fine. Perhaps- wait-*" The hologram Kasi started to stand, and then the transmission went dead.

"Hey, Kasi! Hey!" Rahab shook the communicator, threatening to break the little device in her big hands. "What the hell is going on today?"

Baruch must have heard his niece's voice rise, because he came over too. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We can't talk to the ships in orbit and I just lost Kasi." Rahab drummed her fingers on her helmet, looking around at the room. Her voice dropped to something barely above a whisper: "Uncle, I think we're being jammed!"

"Sure sounds like it," said Baruch. "Always sow confusion in the enemy's ranks before a battle, Rahab. I'm sure our enemies know this too."

A sudden knot of dread twisted in Esera's stomach, and the Force screamed at her through the haze of the dark side that surrounded everything.

The golden eyes of a GX1 appeared in the chamber entrance, but instead of continuing its patrol, the droid stepped in. Sellero barked at it immediately: "Droid, what's going on?"

The droid ignored her, and strode right into the middle of the chamber. Kryze glared up at the machine. "I'm in charge here, droid. What is it?" she asked.

The deep mechanical growl of the GX1 spoke in the tense silence: "General Potkin sends her regards."

Kryze's eyes went wide. All too late, Esera saw that the droid's blaster had deployed from its arm. *Gone rogue,* Crede had said. The droid raised its arm, a split-second motion that seemed to take a century to pass, and red light filled the chamber.

All hell broke loose.

"Everything's packed away in there?" Alize asked, as she shoved a ridiculously large frying pan into a cupboard.

"Yeah, all done," Sanya said, locking up the cabinet of plates and dishes.

"Good girl." The Zygerrian patted Sanya's head, her claws scratching nicely against her scalp. Sanya wasn't about to admit how good that felt, nor that she really needed the extra physical reassurance right now.

They finished closing up the galley, and retreated to Alize's cabin, expecting things to get hectic at any moment. "I hate waiting for this," Alize groaned, checking the straps on her seat. "This will be the third time I get shaken up like a toy-"

The ship's lights went red, and an alarm rang out. Voyan's voice followed on the intercom: "*General quarters, general quarters, all hands man your action stations-*"

"Here we go," said Sanya. She'd thought of something clever since Emberlene: Sanya knew how to get into the bridge comms, which were not secure internally. She punched the intercom panel, and began playing the bridge chatter in Alize's cabin.

"*-going on?*" Durm's voice asked, from somewhere else in the ship.

"*That star destroyer just blasted a crater the size of a Raxulon city block where the Tenau ship was parked,*" Voyan told him, "*and they wiped out most of the village too.*"

Sanya let out a shaky breath, her eyes filled with tears. "Oh no," she whispered.

"How many people were down there?" Alize asked, hushed.

"Dozens in the ship, hundreds in the village," said Sanya. She clenched her fists. "What kind of woman is Potkin, to do something like that? How dare she call herself a Jedi!"

"*Get me a firing solution,*" Voyan said, probably to a droid.

"*Commander, you said we couldn't fight that star destroyer!*" Shau's voice said, shaking as badly as Sanya was right now.

"*We can't, but we need to do something until the Captain and the others are back!*"

"*Sir,*" a droid said, "Pride of Sellero *is charging weapons. They're targeting the star destroyer.*"

"*Good, maybe that'll buy us time,*" said Voyan.

"*They're even smaller than us!*" Shau said.

"*And stupider, if they think they can take a* Tector *in that corvette! We need to make sure the Captain gets off that planet, if those pirates want to help, that's great!*"

Sanya only hoped those two nice boys, Trapper Wolf and Judow, weren't onboard *Pride*. She didn't want names going with the faces of people she knew were dead now.

"The operation has begun, General," Commander Rex's hologram said. Potkin held the handgrip tight as the AT-TE stomped down the city street, its tremors making the clone's hologram wobble.

"See to it," Potkin told him, and switched the channel to *Daring*'s line. "Report, Captain Danigan."

"*We've destroyed the Ciutricene warship on the surface,*" Danigan said, "*and we are moving to engage the pirates now.*"

"What about the Separatists?"

"*They appear to be hiding behind the pirates,*" said the captain.

"Disable the pirate corvette with your ion cannons; deal with the *Recusant* however you see fit."

"*Acknowledged, General*."

Now came Potkin's part of the operation: finding a new leader for Mandalore. Her AT-TE moved right up to the entrance of the Sundari prison complex, where she and her clone troopers dismounted.

"What is the meaning of this-" a Mandalorian warrior in Clan Wren colors started, but Potkin took his head off with her lightsaber.

"Kill the Wrens, try not to hit too many civilians," Potkin told the clones.

"Yes, General!" they answered.

She gave them a few minutes head start before heading in herself, straight to the highest security block, deep inside the building. Resistance was light at best; most of the Wren warriors were already being engaged in the tunnels or at the spaceport. Sitting alone in his cell, a bored-looking Gar Saxon regarded her with surprise.

"A Jedi?" he said, eying her lightsaber. "What are you doing here?"

"I am General Shadday Potkin, and I am a Knight of the Republic. I'm coming to you because Bo-Katan Kryze has... outlived her usefulness," she said.

Gar Saxon sat up, eyes suddenly alight. "I'm glad the Republic is finally seeing things my way," he said.

"Mandalore needs a new ruler. A strong ruler. But a ruler who knows not to bite the hand that feeds him. Do you understand, Saxon?"

"I understand. But I can't promise I won't nip at times." Saxon offered her a smug little smirk she wanted to slap off his face. But Potkin forced that anger down.

"You'll do. Just be sure to keep yourself useful. Chancellor Tarkin doesn't play nice like Palpatine did."

"I can see I've missed a lot in here," said Saxon. Potkin deactivated the forcefield.

"Assemble your Deathwatch, we have a city to take over. And a prime minister to pay a visit, too."

Four lightsaber blades pierced the GX1, one green, one yellow, and two blue. Esera gave a glance at Ventress and Tano, as they pulled back from the machine, which fell to the floor with a crash. They had no respite: two more GX1s were coming into the chamber, laser cannons blasting, wrist rockets soared out into the crowd of Mandalorians. The three Force sensitives sheltered behind the fallen droid, shrapnel clattered off its armor.

"What the hell is this!?" Ventress screeched. "Komara, did your pirate friends betray us!?"

"Sellero!" She darted away from the wrecked droid, lightsaber held out, and cornered the pirate princess. Murshida and the magnaguards had their weapons active, but the droids were focused on the Mandalorians. "What have you done!?" she screamed.

"I didn't do anything!" Sellero screamed back, eyes as wide as saucers, sweat dripping down her brow. Another pair of GX1s entered, laying down fire on the Mandalorians. One turned, and its eye fixed on Esera. She hardly had time to jump out of the way before it began shooting. Purity got Zule's lightsaber out, and bounded off towards it.

"We need to get out of here, Captain!" Murshida said. "This is turning into a slaughter!"

"Purity, Murshida, Rahab, Baruch, we are leaving!" yelled Esera. She pointed at the magnaguards. "You two, up front!"

"We can't just leave!" Rahab said.

"Rahab! A good warrior knows when to withdraw," Baruch told her. "Komara's right. We'll figure out what's going on later, we need to get out of here first. You're no good to your clan if you die down here with all the rest of these people!"

The magnaguards' electrostaves were not effective against the GX1s armor. The huge war droids ignored the blows, and tried to swat them away. Murshida leaned forward, and did something Esera had never seen before: from the back of his armor, two small capsules shot off, puffing into clouds of glittering smoke, and two blinding flares lit up the room like miniature suns.

"Run!" Murshida boomed. The GX1s' infrared sensors must have been blinded by the flares, and their other sensors dazzled by the glittering smoke, the droids fired wildly wherever they detected the sounds of footsteps.

As they ran, Esera stumbled over a body; she saw a glimpse of red hair. She didn't have time to think, Purity pulled her forward into the darkness of the tunnel beyond… where more droids had gathered.

"Get under them!" Judow's voice came from behind. "They won't shoot at each other!"

"But they'll stomp!" said Lelin.

Murshida shot off another capsule, and one of the magnaguards jammed its staff into the leg joint of a GX1, making the war machine fall to one knee.

"Work, you useless piece of-" Sellero shrieked a stream of curse words at her communicator, which continued to show ComFast's logo. "Lelin! What is going on!? Why are my droids doing this!?"

"Someone's gotten into the computer on our ship," Lelin said, as they dodged under the GX1s. The droids, true to Lelin's word, stomped down, with force enough to crack the duracrete. Trapper Wolf barely escaped one's feet. One deployed its flamethrower, and Esera raised a hand to hold the swirling stream of liquid flame at bay with the Force.

"Go!" she yelled.

One droid swung a fist down at her, but a blue blade cut it off mid-swing. "It's Potkin, it has to be," Ahsoka Tano said. Together, they forced the flames back, and followed the others, escaping through the blinding haze the Skakoan warrior had deployed. Asajj Ventress appeared with them. They ran blindly down the tunnels, taking this turn and that, trying to escape the droids.

"When I had my ship fueled up last night, I really hoped I wouldn't need it," Ventress groaned.

"How do we get back up to the surface?" asked Esera.

"No idea," said Tano. "Maybe- hold on, I sense something."

"Clones," Esera said.

Up ahead, a squad of clones in blue-marked armor rushed around the corner, flashlights shining. "Freeze!" a clone said. "Drop your weapons and put your hands up!"

"Hey, hey, take it easy, Kano," said Tano, raising her hands, lightsabers off, "it's me, Ahsoka. We're all on the same side here. Mostly."

"Commander Tano?" The clone, Kano, sounded surprised. "What are you doing with these criminals?"

Esera moved over to her people. Murshida's eyes were fixed behind them. "The droids are spreading out into the tunnels," he said under his breath. "We don't have long before they catch up. And I only have three countermeasures left."

"No one's a criminal here," Tano told the clones. "That's Esera Komara, she was a Jedi just like me. We were trying to end the war here on Mandalore. Someone's gone and ruined that, I'm afraid."

"We have a termination order for Komara," said Kano, nodding his helmet toward her. "The Skakoan too. And there's a bounty for the pirate woman, she's wanted dead or alive."

"Well, that termination order is going to have to wait. They've done no harm to the Republic here," Tano said.

"General Potkin thought you'd see it that way." Kano raised his gun, and the rest of his squad did too. "Commander, *please,* step aside."

"General Potkin? Are you really listening to that woman?" asked Tano, utterly baffled.

"If you won't step aside, we'll take you down too," said Kano. "Don't make me do this, Commander Tano." His voice sounded on the verge of breaking, beneath his helmet.

"Have you gone mad?" Tano asked him.

"Orders are orders, Commander." Kano let out a shaky breath. "And good soldiers… follow orders."

The clones opened up, a hail of blue blaster fire sailing towards them. Esera and Ventress, not trusting the clones, were ready to block, but Ahsoka Tano was reeling from shock. She barely got her lightsabers on in time, and deflected wildly, scattering bolts everywhere. Lelin jumped in front of Sellero, and was riddled with blaster fire. Purity took several shots, and more bounced off Murshida's armor, shielding Judow and Wolf. The two Mandalorians were hit in their own armor, but they returned fire.

"Come on!" Ventress yelled, and she and Esera jumped into the clones like whirlwinds of light. It was over in seconds. Purity was only just back on her feet, Zule's lightsaber in hand, when the last clone fell. Tano stared in horror.

"Three years of serving together… and they turned on me. Just like that," she said.

"Lelin!" Sellero screamed, shaking the man's body. "No, no, no, this can't be happening! This can't be happening! Don't you leave me too, Lelin! Don't you leave me too!" Tears streamed down the princess's face, and she roiled with anguish in the Force. Lelin had been dead before his body even hit the floor.

"Are you alright, Purity?" asked Esera.

"I am combat capable," said Purity. "This body is far more resilient than a purely organic one." She looked at Sellero, troubled.

"We need to keep moving," Murshida told everyone, his voice booming through the dark of the tunnel. "Those droids will be coming around that corner back there any second."

"Come on," Judow said, grabbing Sellero by the shoulders.

"No!" she cried.

"He's dead, Princess!" said Wolf, his coat full of holes but otherwise miraculously unscathed. "Get yourself together!"

"He's been with me my whole life! I'm not leaving him down here!"

The scene playing out before Esera's eyes was too familiar for comfort. *No, she's not like me, she's a pirate, Lelin was a pirate, my master and I were Jedi.* And her master had died a stupid, pointless death. Lelin had died defending his princess.

It was Baruch of all people who took the initiative. "Princess, this man died so you could live. Are you going to repay him by dying here alongside him?" asked the Mandalorian. Sellero, reduced to sobbing, could only shake her head. "Stand up. Make his sacrifice mean something."

Judow and Wolf were left to help the princess; they also picked up guns from the clone bodies. Esera waited for everyone to pass her before following. Baruch had a slight limp; he must have been hit more seriously than she'd thought. But he was a Mandalorian, he knew how to take care of himself. "Magnaguards, do you have inertial navigation?"

"Yes, Captain," said one of the droids. "We would have to retrace our steps to the central chamber to use it."

"Not an option. There's got to be more than one way out of here. If you detect a change in air flow, tell me."

"Yes, Captain."

For a short while, they continued through the dark passages, lit only by flashlights. The sounds of fighting were all around them. Blasters ahead, explosions behind, tremors that made dust fall from the ceiling coming now and then.

"We're lost, aren't we?" asked Rahab. Her voice was strained. "Lost, in an underground maze. This is great, just great!"

"Keep your head on, girl," Baruch told her. He too sounded strained, but for other reasons. The limp was getting worse. "This is no time to panic."

"Captain," said a magnaguard, "there's air flow in that direction."

And also from that direction, there was a spurt of gunfire, very close by. It sounded heavier than anything else they'd heard yet. "That's the GC, one of ours," Judow said. "Or was one of ours. We'd better go around it."

"You can't do anything about this, can you, Purity?" asked Esera.

"If you are asking me to hack the enemy droids, I cannot. I was not designed to directly interface with computers."

"We'll do this the hard way, then." Esera began gesturing to the others "Murshida, Wolf, Judow, provide covering fire-"

"Hey, hey, hold on, who put you in charge here?" Ventress asked. "Why are we trying to fight these things? They're after the Mandalorians and you, not the rest of us. I say we slip away while we can!"

"They'll be after you as soon as they find out you helped kill those clones back there," said Esera. "In case you haven't realized, Ventress, this General Potkin isn't playing by usual Republic rules."

"And that's why I'm getting out of here. Anyone who wants to live and not go down with the Separatists and Mandos, follow me!"

"Say no more, lady," Judow said.

"You can't do that!" said Sellero. "You work for *me!*"

"Look, Princess, I'm not in it for any cause, just the credits. And credits are worthless if I'm dead. It was fun while it lasted, but I'm leaving this sinking ship." Judow shouldered his blaster, and walked off after Ventress.

"She's my ride out of here," Tano said. "I still might be able to salvage this on the Loyalist side. Sorry, Komara."

"Yeah, do what you have to do," said Esera. "This isn't *your* fault."

"I was getting tired of this *Sellero fleet* clown show anyway," Trapper Wolf said. He went after the three. "See you around, Princess."

Sellero, her face still streaked with tears, looked crestfallen. In a matter of minutes she'd lost her whole crew that was down here with her. Lelin was dead, Judow and Wolf deserted, the rest of her technicians on the surface were surely killed or captured too, her droids had gone rogue somehow… She was a woman alone in the universe.

"Sellero," said Esera.

The pirate princess stared after Judow and Wolf, who'd vanished into the darkness.

"Sellero!" Esera snapped.

"What?!" roared Sellero, jerking her head to Esera, eyes holding back another dam of tears.

"Do you have a gun?"

Sellero blinked, and wiped at her eyes. "Um, yes, I do," She sniffled, and reached into her coat, pulling out a pair of red gloves.

"Those aren't guns, Princess," said Esera.

"I, uh, need these to fire it." On a second look, the gloves weren't gloves at all, but some kind of reinforced exoskeleton for the hands. Out from a holster on the inside of her coat came the biggest pistol Esera had ever seen. Sellero pushed a large cartridge into it. "If that faithless junker rat was right, and the GC is ahead, we'll need this."

"That looks like it'll do," said Esera. "Come on, you and Murshida are fire support."

"What exactly is the GC?" asked Rahab, anxiety flowing off her in the Force.

"One of the special model GX1s," Sellero said. She sniffled again. "Heavy fire support unit, with additional armor. You guys won't even scratch it with those peashooters."

"Everything has a weak point," Esera said. "You and Murshida stay back with the magnaguards, Princess, take every shot you can. Baruch, Rahab, use those jetpacks and get above it. Purity and I will take it head on."

"Leave it to us," said Baruch.

"Are you ready for this, Purity?" asked Esera.

"I am with you to whatever end, Captain," said Purity.

"Let's go!"

She and Purity rushed down the curving tunnel, lightsabers out. Baruch and Rahab rocketed out ahead, jetpacks blazing in the dark. Behind followed the other four members of the band. At the end of the tunnel, caught in the flashlights of all the guns pointed at it, was a bulkier GX1, its body and limbs painted red, its head painted white, with two laser cannons mounted over its shoulders. Behind it was a ladder, and at the entrance of another tunnel were the still-smoking remains of Mandalorian bodies.

The GX1-GC opened fire, its cannons turning duracrete to rubble wherever they focused. The blasters on its arms sprayed bolts everywhere, Murshida popped off another one of his countermeasures. Above, Baruch and Rahab pelted its head, while Murshida and the magnaguards, using clone guns, shot at whatever they could hit… which wasn't much, as Murshida's smoke worked both ways. Esera and Purity jumped and dodged through the glittering haze, one using her supernatural reflexes, one using her superhuman agility. Purity was faster; she leapt up and kicked off the GC's knee, and swung her lightsaber at one of its cannons, slicing it in half. She was swatted across the chamber for her trouble.

Esera slid between its legs, trying to cut its pistons, but its armor was too thick to melt quickly under her lightsaber. The machine began to swing around, its manipulator arms unfolding, and then-

A deafening roar and blinding light shook the chamber, and the GC toppled over, its back armor melted into a glowing-hot mess. Sellero ejected the cartridge from her oversized pistol, and it clattered to the ground, distinctly hollow-sounding. "I've only got a few of these, don't just stand there!" she yelled. Already, the GC was getting to its feet again. Rahab and Baruch jumped onto it, and planted something in the hole.

"Get clear!" he shouted.

No one needed to be told twice. The GC exploded, its waist and legs flying one direction, its head, torso and arms another. But it wasn't out of the fight yet. Pushing its top half upright, the GC raised an arm and continued firing, sending a splatter of red bolts across Baruch's chest, and one bouncing off Rahab's helmet. One of the magnaguards lobbed its electrostaff into the central eye of the machine, and Purity and Esera rushed to dismember the war droid. Finally, the machine was dead.

An aching pain in Esera's shoulder told her she'd been hit at some point. Purity had taken two more shots too, going by the scorch marks in her clothes. "While I am durable, Captain," she said to Esera, "even I have my limits."

"This is no time to think about limits, Purity," said Esera. "Rahab, how's Baruch?"

"Fried," Baruch groaned, from where he laid on the ground. Rahab helped him peel off his chest armor, which had been all but destroyed. He coughed and wheezed. The armor had only stopped some of the blaster bolts.

"Don't talk, uncle," said Rahab. "Your right lung is full of holes. Just breathe slowly."

"He was shot through the ankle, too," Murshida noted.

Purity bent over, to whisper into Esera's ear: "He is dead without serious medical attention within the next half hour."

"Murshida, can you treat this?" asked Esera. "Like how you treated me? Back then?"

"Not without spiritual preparation," he said. "We had hours and hours with you."

"I'll carry him," Rahab said. "We can get somewhere safe."

"Nowhere's safe down here," said Sellero. She sniffled, and wiped her nose with her metal glove. "If Potkin's got the droids following their hunter-killer protocol, they won't stop until they've turned this whole maze upside down."

"Rahab, carry him," said Esera. "You've got the jetpack so you don't need to climb this ladder."

"I'll go last," Murshida said. "In case it can't hold my weight."

Esera's stomach twisted at the idea. "All things are possible with the Force, Mister Murshida."

They began the climb up. The durasteel ladder *did* hold Murshida, though it creaked ominously under his armored pressure suit. They inched toward the next level of the tunnel system, and one step closer to safety…

Another squad of 501st Legion clones rushed down the tunnel, shouting about a contact further west, whatever west meant down here. When they passed, Asajj let out a sigh. Her exit was supposed to be quiet, the last thing she needed was a running battle.

"They turned on me," Tano said again, still disbelieving. "Three years, fighting side by side, and they tried to kill me because of someone's orders."

"You Jedi bought a brainwashed army, I don't know what you expected," said Asajj. Tano was focused on the clone problem, but Asajj couldn't stop kicking herself for her own shortsightedness. For the last day she'd been convinced it'd be Saxon that Potkin allied with. As it turned out, she should have been taking a closer look at Komara's pirates.

The four waited a moment, before emerging from the side passage, going the opposite direction. *If the clones came from this way, it must lead to the surface,* thought Asajj. From somewhere far away, a laser cannon's fire sounded. *Glad I'm not whoever is on the bad end of that…*

Did she feel guilty for abandoning Komara's gang? No, not at all. The little girl was probably going to get them all killed. The two pirate kids were wise to join up with her. Though Asajj didn't know how useful they'd be. Trapper Wolf looked like he'd never held a blaster before in his life, while Judow was short and scrawny. But they were keeping up, even if Wolf was drawing short on breath.

"I'd rather be in my starfighter right now," Wolf sighed.

"And get shot down by V-wings?" asked Judow. "No thanks. Once we hit the surface I'm gonna vanish into the crowd and get on the first ship leaving this dump."

"You'll never vanish into the crowd with hair that dark," said Asajj. "Everyone up there is-" She snapped her mouth shut and raised her hand. Everyone stopped in their tracks. Asajj turned her flashlight off, and the others did so. Up at the intersection ahead, a second squad of clones appeared.

"The Wren woman's group is four crossings west," said the squad sergeant. "They've already blown through yellow squad. We're waiting for them here while blue squad pushes them towards us. Nothing gets through us, got it?"

"Yes, sir!" the clones answered.

"Great," whispered Asajj. "We're stuck here."

"At least we're on the right track," said Wolf. "If anyone knows how to get out of here, it's the Mandos, right?"

"Right," said Asajj. "So we wait."

The four squatted in the darkness, weapons in hand, eyes fixed on the little points of light thirty or so meters away. They didn't have to wait long.

"Contact!" a clone yelled. "Fifty meters!"

"Weapons free!"

Blue blasters shot out, perpendicular to the tunnel Asajj was in. She pulled on the arms of her companions, and began to creep forward.

"One down!" said a clone. "Two down!"

"Save some for the rest of us!" the squad sergeant said. A yellow blaster bolt knocked him to the ground, dead, a moment later.

Asajj launched herself forward, lightsaber blazing to life, and decapitated one of the troopers before he knew what hit him. Behind her, Wolf and Judow shot wildly, hitting nothing but the wall. Her distraction was all that was needed to tip the scales, and the Mandalorians down the other tunnel picked off the clones driven out of their impromptu cover behind support buttresses.

"Ventress?" a familiar voice called.

"Ursa Wren!" Asajj called back. "How nice to see you again!"

The Wren warriors came forward, limping and lurching. Not a single one was unwounded. The clan matriarch herself was hobbling along with a DC-15A blaster rifle as a crutch. Her face was hidden behind a helmet, but Asajj felt her fury when she caught sight of the pirates. "Treacherous scum!" Wren spat, raising her blaster, but Tano stepped up.

"Hold on, Wren, Sellero's people aren't behind this!" she said. "The clones and droids are trying to kill them as much as us!"

Wren's hand shook, her finger caressed the trigger. But she lowered the gun. "If you say so," she growled.

"Do you know a way out?" asked Asajj.

"Of course. But every way out is guarded. They put their elite machines at the exit tunnels." Everyone looked at Judow and Wolf

"Hey, I had *no* idea someone had gotten into the computer on *Pride of Sellero,*" said Judow, hands raised. "We were trying to keep you crazy Mandos from killing each other. Yes, we did put our special units at the exits. Komara's group ran right into the GC, they're probably dead right now. Wreck Dias, Haiaku Spirit, Zeta Grand, those are the ones to *really* watch out for. They're- they *were* our best performing units, given special upgrades, increased processing power and independence, real scary stuff. If we're lucky, they've been drawn off from their stations by brave idiots like Komara. If we're not, we'll meet one."

"And what do we do if we meet one of those?" asked Wren.

"Run," said Judow.

"I'm not afraid of any droid," said Asajj. "One machine is like any other. We'll cut them all down."

"I, uh, don't think you understand what these things are capable of," Trapper Wolf said.

"Stop arguing and let's go," snapped Tano. "The longer we sit down here, the more likely it is we'll be caught by another clone patrol."

"By your command, Lady Tano," Asajj said. *I saw you back there,* she thought. When it came to killing the clones, Ahsoka Tano stood back, and did nothing. *Maybe if I'd served for three years with them, I'd hesitate too…* But Asajj made it a point never to stay in one place that long.

Wren and her warriors led the way, but it was not a peaceful passage to the surface. They encountered two more groups of clones, and Asajj could sense the sick feeling growing in Tano with every clone trooper they killed. There were four more GX1s, which put up a fiercer fight without the Skakoan monster's smoke and flares. Most of Wren's surviving warriors died to them, and those still alive were bleeding from shrapnel wounds.

"How is there even this much blood inside me?" Judow asked, holding his jacket sleeve to his temple, over the long cut he'd gotten there. He and Wolf were both pale and shaking from adrenaline. This was the first time they'd been on a battlefield.

"Just keep the pressure on," said Tano, as she wrapped a torn-off sleeve from her own clothes around her arm.

"I never signed up for this," grumbled Wolf. He'd turned his shredded coat into bandages for those still living. Somehow, the boy hadn't even been scratched yet. *This kid might be a good luck charm,* Asajj thought. She'd gotten singed by a wrist rocket exploding nearby, and then sliced by shrapnel.

"We're coming up on the exit," Ursa Wren said. Her limp had gotten much worse, and she sounded exhausted behind her helmet. "Pirate, which one of your droids guards this one?"

"I… have no idea," Judow said. He swayed on his feet. "Doesn't matter. Just run for it, if the droid's still there."

"I'll check it out. Wolf, you're not hurt, back me up," said Asajj.

"Uh, sure," said Wolf, putting on his bravest face. His knuckles were white on the DC-15S he'd picked up.

The crept up on the chamber, where a ladder ascended to the surface city. It was empty. "Jackpot," whispered Wolf.

"Hell yeah, it's a jackpot," said Asajj. "Get up there, pirate, check things out on the surface. I'll get the others."

In short order, Asajj had the dozen or so remaining Wrens and her own companions gathered around the ladder. She looked around the chamber, peering into the gloom of the tunnels, listening to the air and listening to the Force, waiting for the droid to appear. It could come out of nowhere; droids had almost no presence in the Force…

Wolf appeared from the gloom above, high up on the ladder. He waved them up, and began his ascent again.

"Looks like it's all good," Asajj said. "Now we-"

A moment of apprehension was the only warning she had. She threw herself down, as something bright streaked into the chamber, the blast of thrusters filling her ears. With a ground-shaking thud, the elite GX1 landed.

"Zeta Grand," squeaked Judoh.

The droid towered above them all at three meters, its armor white and blue. Two antennae rose out of its head, and upon its back were what looked like wings, and on either side of its waist were engines.

"Oh, *holy f-!*"Trapper Wolf's cry was cut off by Zeta Grand screaming its challenge, a nightmarish mechanical siren. Its wings popped up, and it released a barrage of missiles. There was not a pebble of cover in the chamber.

Asajj threw up her arms, flinging every ounce of her Force strength outwards, heaving the hand-sized missiles away from her, where they exploded above her head. The Mandalorians were not so lucky, and the little warheads landed among them, blowing off chunks of flesh and entire limbs. Tano was still up, she'd shielded Judow with Ventress's same technique, and Trapper Wolf had once more escaped unscathed. The fool boy was taking aim with his DC-15S in one hand, from way up on the ladder.

"Get out of here!" Ursa Wren yelled. Zeta Grand blasted its siren again, and unloaded with its arm-mounted blasters. The few Mandalorians still in one piece activated their jetpacks, but Zeta Grand wasn't having it. Something inside it spooled up, a rising whine that made Asajj's spine tingle. It jumped into the air, waist-engines roaring, and from its palms, solid red laser beams flew out. The machine spun its upper half around and around. The beams whirled through the chamber, leaving glowing trails on the walls, and slicing anyone caught in them into pieces. The ladder was being cut segment by segment, but parts were still anchored to the wall.

"We need to go!" shouted Tano. She grabbed Judow's hand. But even as she did, a red beam sliced straight through the boy, a diagonal slash severing his body in two. At the foot of the ladder, Ursa Wren lay, her legs cut off above the knees by the laser.

Zeta Grand dropped back to the floor, and sprayed the whole area with more blaster fire. Asajj whirled her lightsaber around, blocking every bolt she could, but a few still nicked her. Tano had moved over to Wren, who was still clinging to life.

"Oh, to hell with it," Asajj said to no one. She ran straight at the droid. Zeta Grand sounded the siren again, and two long blades unsheathed themselves from its forearms. A red plasma coating flowed over them, crackling and sizzling. *You gotta be kidding me!* The machine brought one blade slamming down on Asajj's lightsaber, and the other swung at her from the side. She threw herself to the ground, rolling under the strike. Far faster than its size belied, Zeta Ground attacked like a professional duelist.

"I'm buying you time, use it!" Asajj screamed over her shoulder. Tano had Wren on her back, and was starting up the ladder. That brave idiot Trapper Wolf was still taking shots at the droid from up top.

Ten seconds lasted a lifetime, in Asajj's fight with Zeta Grand. The droid was fast, not as fast as Grievous, but it had even more power behind its blows. *Who was Sellero fighting to need a killer like this?* she wondered, almost amused with the absurdity of her situation.

"Ventress!" came Tano's voice. She'd made it up the ladder. A cable flew down.

"Playtime's over, Zeta," said Asajj, flipping backwards and seizing the cable. Above, a motor whirred, and she was whisked up out of the chamber. Zeta Grand raised a palm, and the red laser beam lanced out, but Asajj already had her lightsaber up. She opened herself utterly to the Force, and let it guide her blade to wherever it needed to be, but she ended up feeling something very hot near her right leg. The machine's siren wailed in rage as she escaped.

"That's two you owe me," Tano said. "Come on, up these stairs! Run!"

With Wren still on her back, the Togruta girl darted up the stairs, where Trapper Wolf was keeping watch. But Asajj fell to her knees. "It got you too?" Wren asked, in a faint voice.

"Yeah," said Asajj. She looked at the laser burn across her thigh, and once she'd seen the wound, the pain hit her with full force. The machine hadn't taken her leg, but it'd burnt a long channel off the outside of her right thigh. Asajj grit her teeth, her eyes watered, and she stifled a groan. "Don't think I'm gonna be running for a bit, Tano."

"It's that bad?" asked Tano.

"'Agony' wouldn't begin to describe it," Asajj said. "Wolf, what's it look like out there?"

"There's clones everywhere, but they're not looking this way," he said.

"Then let's move!" said Asajj. This time, she couldn't keep quiet as she forced herself to her feet. How far could she go on this leg? "Get Wren on your back, pirate, we're going to the spaceport."

She limped up the stairs, each step with burning pain, and into the daylight of Sundari, emerging onto a street at the ground level of the dome.

They made it twenty meters before the street behind them exploded upwards. All four of them were thrown to the pavement. Asajj rolled over, and rising out of the smoke, wings spread like an Angel of Iego, was Zeta Grand.

"YIELD THE MANDALORIAN, AND YOU WILL BE ALLOWED TO DEPART." The machine's voice fell on them like thunder, delving into Asajj's very bones. *Oh right, it can fly…* Asajj recalled. *We're sitting nerfs out here, even if I wasn't crippled!*

"Alright," Asajj said, but Tano had other ideas as usual:

"We're not giving her up," said Tano, pushing herself to her feet, lightsabers in hand. "If you want her, come and get her."

"SO BE IT, JEDI."

Zeta Grand began to spool up its lasers.

"No, no, no!" the civilian prime minister cried out. "Do not let that droid blow up our city!"

"You can rebuild," Gar Saxon said. "Call it job creation. Everyone loves a job creator."

"Potkin, stop that thing!" Vatai said, waving a finger at the hologram display.

Always with the complaining, thought Potkin, letting out a sigh. The real fight had been about to start. "If you insist, Prime Minister." She switched her comms line to the droid: "Zeta Grand, stand down."

The custom GX1 lowered its weapons, and floated down to the ground, standing at attention. Tano and Ventress, plus some random pirate, grabbed Ursa Wren and fled for the dome wall. Except for the pirate, they were in varying states of poor health after coming out of the tunnels.

"Saxon, you're up. I want Wren dead or alive. Do what you want with the others."

"With pleasure," said Saxon. He put on his helmet, and waved to two of his men waiting at the door. "Let's go bag a Wren, boys!"

When the tall Mandalorian was gone, Vatai slumped in relief. "I always hated him," he muttered. "How much longer is this operation of yours going to continue, Potkin?"

She didn't deign to answer the prime minister directly. "Commander Rex, how goes the mop-up down there?"

Rex's fuzzy hologram appeared. "We've captured a few, but almost all of our targets are being found dead, General. These GX1s aren't discerning."

"And Bo-Katan?" asked Vatai, leaning in anxiously.

"She's confirmed dead. In fact, it'd be easier to tell you who's still alive: we've got the Skirata and Carid representatives in custody, Rook Kast and her remaining fighters are trapped in a dead end, and Ursa Wren's whereabouts are unknown."

"Excellent work, Commander," Potkin said. "I see why Skywalker thought so highly of you. You're one of the most efficient clones who's ever served me."

"An army of one man, but the right man for the job," Rex said. There was no enthusiasm in his voice.

"We have Wren's location, Commander, don't waste manpower on her. Have your men secured the landing platforms?"

"Yes, General. I've got two platoons at the spaceport; one's spread out through the facility, the other is focused on the traitor's starship. They've been unable to enter it."

"And your former commander's ship?"

Rex did not hesitate for a moment. "It's being watched, General, but you told me the priority was *Whirlwind,* not *Banshee.*"

"I did say that…" *Whirlwind* had gone by another name not long ago: *Scimitar*. Potkin was dearly interested in what secrets lay within that machine. She wanted that ship, and she wanted it in one piece. "Do you have the traitor's location?"

"Her party has made it to the first level of the tunnel system. We don't have a precise location."

"That's good enough, Commander. Carry on with the operation. I have something to see to."

"Someone's on our side," said Asajj, looking back one last time at the still form of Zeta Grand. Who, why, it didn't matter. The machine had simply *stopped,* and stood watching as they escaped.

"How are we still alive, man?" asked Trapper Wolf, eyes so wide that his eyeballs could have fallen out. Sweat covered his face and stained his shirt, he gripped his blaster with such strength that either its metal or his fingers would break if he kept it up. He adjusted his shoulders, where an ailing Ursa Wren clung

"Try not to think about it," Tano said. "How are you doing, Wren?"

"Alive," she said, in a weak voice.

"Stay with us. You've got a daughter, right?"

"Sabine."

"You need to live. If not for yourself, for her, got it?"

"I know…"

Cauterized wounds or not, she needs medical attention, thought Asajj, as they slowly limped their way to the spaceport. *We* all *need medical attention, except Wolf!* She and Tano were cut up and shot up, dehydrated and dazed, it was doubtful if they were even a quarter as combat effective as they were when the fiasco had begun.

"That's the spaceport up ahead," Asajj said, as they crouched behind a parked civilian speeder. "Three levels up is *Banshee*. It's got space for three, if you *really* squeeze in."

"You three take it," said Wolf. "If I can get to my Z-95, I can fly myself out of here."

"Right on, kid. You'd think a spaceport would be heavily guarded at a time like this, but I hardly see anyone…" Asajj scanned back and forth, but there were less than half a dozen clones visible.

"That one, over there. That's Reed. He's got that little bird painted on the side of his helmet. I don't think any other clone can see him from where he is," said Tano.

"Easy kill," said Asajj.

"No! No." Tano shook her head. "He's not the most thoughtful of clones. I can walk right up and mind trick him. He'll let us walk in and no one will be the wiser."

"Jedi can really do that?" asked Wolf. "Back home they always said Jedi could do amazing things, but… I never *knew*, you know?"

"Welcome to the real world, kid," Ursa Wren mumbled. Tano went off to mind trick the clone. To Asajj's pleasant surprise, the clone nodded along and opened the little security door. All four were allowed to pass unchallenged. They entered the spaceport's ticketing lobby and luggage check, and took a turbolift to the third level. The place was deserted.

Or, almost deserted. Because immediately outside the lift, a dozen Mandalorians in black and red armor stepped out from behind columns, guns raised.

"About time you showed up," said a gruff voice, from the tallest among them.

"Saxon!" growled Wren.

"So, you're with Potkin after all," Tano said. "Ventress was right all along."

"An alliance of convenience. We both need each other for now, but we both know there'll be a day when one of us turns on the other. My loyalty is to Mandalore, not the Republic." Saxon tried to shrug while keeping the blaster trained on Tano.

"Only a Mandalore you rule," Wren said.

"That's the point, my dear Ursa. I was given instructions to bring you in dead or alive. But unlike the Skiratas or Carids, or Kast, *I'm* the one who's found you, not clones. And that's an opportunity for both of us."

"Go to hell," said Wren, and Asajj wished she'd shut up and let Saxon talk. *You're right there,* Banshee, *just two hundred meters away… If only I could call you…*

"I could kill you, and believe me, I'd take great satisfaction in doing it. But then I'd have to explain to little Sabine why I had to kill her mother, and that'd be an awkward conversation at best." Ursa Wren growled, a wordless sound of fury, but Saxon talked right over her. "So here's the deal, Wren. I'm going to capture you alive. You're going to be reunited with your family on Krownest. But you are going to pledge loyalty to *me*. When the time comes to oust the Republic, you will answer my call, and you can have all the revenge you like on these people. Or I can just shoot you. It's your choice."

Take the deal, take the deal! Asajj thought, trying to force the words into Wren's mind.

"Fine," spat Wren. "Until the hour the Republic is off Mandalore, I pledge my loyalty to you, Gar Saxon. On my honor and the honor of Clan Wren."

"And that's what I wanted to hear. Set her down, boy. We'll take it from here." Saxon waved his gun at Wolf.

"What about us?" asked Tano.

"I'm not an idiot," Saxon said. "Taking on two Jedi at this range? We'd all be dead in seconds. Go, you're free, all three of you."

Clearly, Saxon had no idea how badly she and Tano were hurt. Asajj put on her hardest face. "Good choice, Saxon," she said. "You're smarter than Kryze made you out to be."

Saxon puffed up. "Well, who's dead and who's alive, huh?"

"Exactly. Take care, Mandalorians. We're out of here." Asajj put her hands on the backs of Tano and Wolf and pushed them towards *Banshee*.

"We'll meet again," Tano said to Wren.

"I await the day. I owe my life to you," Ursa Wren said.

And that was the last they saw of Mandalorians. Asajj and Tano made a point of calmly walking to *Banshee,* while Wolf scurried away down the terminal to his Z-95, one of several parked. Not until the two were safely masked by the ship did Asajj let her façade break.

"That was close," she breathed, leaning against the hull. That her leg was not glowing surprised her, because it burned hot enough with pain to do so.

"It's not over yet." Tano's narrowed eyes were fixed on something further along the terminal. It was a ship Asajj had only seen once, briefly, but one she'd never forget: *Scimitar.* Maul's infiltrator, and then Sidious's, she'd learned from Dooku. Clone troopers surrounded it. *A lot* of clone troopers. They were looking towards *Banshee.* One was pointing at them.

"Get in, get in!" Asajj yelled. They scrambled up the little boarding steps, into the cockpit. Tano wasn't even strapped in before *Asajj* had *Banshee* lifting off. Blue blaster bolts flew towards them, but the shields went up, and then they were soaring away from Sundari. Behind them flew a lone Z-95.

"*Wolf here,*" came the kid's voice. "*We've got incoming Republic fighters, requesting instructions.*"

"Do *not* engage!" Tano yelled as she wrangled with her headset. "If we so much as scratch a clone fighter, the Senate will declare us outlaws. Again."

"*I'm, uh, getting missile lock warnings, Miss Tano.*"

"Evade them!"

"*Here we go,*" sighed Wolf.

"Here we go," Asajj muttered. *Banshee* was missile-locked too. *If we die trying to make orbit…* No, best to leave that thought unfinished. Asajj swallowed her fear and doubt. It was time to fly.

Encounter rocked under another volley of the *Tector*'s turbolasers. For the last hour, they'd danced at the edge of the star destroyer's effective range, but something had changed, and the bombardments had grown worse and worse in the last few minutes. Somewhere far away, there was a screech of metal on metal that faded into nothing

If Sanya had been scared at the droid reporting port-side shields had failed, then the hiss of the emergency environmental seal closing over the cabin door was the most terrifying thing she'd ever heard. Alize's cabin was cut off from the rest of the ship.

"*Hull breach, on decks two through ten!*" a droid on the bridge announced.

"*Roll us over to starboard! Damage control, seal off what you can,*" said Voyan. There was a click on the intercom. "*Sanya, Alize, put on the environmental suits in the emergency locker. We're venting atmosphere and have no way to contain it. Only switch to the suit's oxygen supply when your cabin loses life support.*"

"Okay," Sanya squeaked. The intercom clicked again; Voyan hadn't even bothered with saying anything else. Alize's big hands trembled as she fumbled at the emergency locker built into the wall, standard in every room on the ship.

"This is even worse than Emberlene," Alize said.

"Esera, I don't want to die on a spaceship for you!" Sanya said, as she pulled on her spacesuit. Its loose skin tightened around her once she sealed it up. The only thing she didn't do was open the oxygen valves and close the helmet visor.

"*When* life support fails, he said," groaned Alize. "Tell me this isn't happening, Sanya!"

"I was hoping you'd say that to me," Sanya said.

Another volley of turbolasers impacted the faltering starboard shields. "*Shields down to twenty-two percent, commander,*" a droid said. "*Reactor heat output is reaching critical safety levels.*"

Sanya threw her arms around the Zygerrian, who hugged her tightly back.

Baruch was dying, and everyone knew it. "Put him down here," Esera said to Rahab.

"What?" asked Rahab.

"Put me down, Rahab," Baruch told his niece between bouts of gasping.

"We'll get you out of here, uncle," said Rahab. She removed her helmet. Her dark hair was stuck to her scalp, soaked with sweat, and her eyes glimmered with tears. "I'll get you out of here."

"A warrior knows-" Baruch coughed, a horrid shuddering noise. "Knows when it's time to go," he finished.

"No, no, don't talk like that!"

"Get this helmet off me, Rahab."

She removed his helmet, and cradled his head in her gloved hands.

"Those clones are right behind us, Captain," Murshida whispered as quietly as he could, which was loud enough for everyone to hear. To accentuate his point, the faint shouts of clones came echoing down the tunnel.

"Give me a gun," Baruch asked. He paused to cough. "Let me go down fighting."

Rahab's face twisted in anger and grief, but she couldn't find the words for what she wanted to say. She grabbed Baruch's hand, and squeezed; then she placed one of her blaster pistols in it.

Baruch pushed himself upright, and put his free hand on Rahab's shoulder. "You tell- you tell your father, I died a warrior. Tell Jerahmeel I died clean."

"I'll tell!" said Rahab. "I'll tell him, I swear!"

"Go, Rahab!"

With a cry, Rahab wrenched herself away, and eight became seven. Samé Sellero had watched the sorry scene in silence, and Esera sensed a profound empathy from her. *So, she can feel for others after all,* Esera thought.

"Captain, what did he mean, *died clean*?" Purity asked, after they'd made it to the next intersection of passages. "He was not literally clean, so he must have been speaking in metaphor."

"Who knows, Purity," said Esera, peering into the darkness, trying to sense for any hidden danger. Far behind them, they heard a sharp burst of blaster fire, and then nothing. "He took that one to his grave."

"How can you be so callous?" Rahab snapped. "Aren't you Jedi–and you *are* a Jedi! –supposed to be guardians of life or something? And you're making jokes?"

Esera gave the girl a tired glance. The big Mandalorian had her helmet on again, but she could hear the pain in her voice, and sense the agony in her soul. Yet, none of it touched Esera. It was there, but it was not hers, and she did not *feel* it. "I'm not a Jedi anymore," she said.

"You didn't even try to save him! You just stood there, and did nothing!"

"There was nothing to do," Esera said.

"My uncle died a *stupid* death to some *stupid* droid, and you-"

She'd heard enough. "This is a battle!" snapped Esera. "People die in battle, no matter how much you love them. Your uncle was shot facing his enemy, that's not a stupid death, that's a *normal* death. You want stupid? How about dying of an infection you don't have the medicine to treat because the person you're counting on most fails you, that's a stupid, pointless, *meaningless* death! What do you know about any of that? You're just a little girl who got fooled into thinking this would be a big fun adventure where you defeat the bad guy and go home to your family. Well, sorry to break it to you, but that's not how war really works. People die and it doesn't matter how much you care about them, there's nothing you can do to stop it, so accept it and move on, okay?"

Rahab shook with anger, but her voice came out low and bitter: "Sellero was right, you really are a monster."

Samé Sellero had the grace to look away.

They didn't find a ladder to the surface, they found a stairway. Cautiously, Esera creeped up, and pushed open the door. "Finally, some luck," she said. "We're in the spaceport basement." There was a sign hanging from the ceiling, directing new arrivals to the baggage claim.

"Fortuitous indeed," Murshida said. "There are heat signatures here, but they're spread out. I suggest taking the stairs to the third level."

"Right," agreed Esera. "Magnaguards, take point. Purity, watch our backs."

They climbed up onto the first floor, where they found themselves in the spaceport lobby. On the mezzanine above, a lone figure stood, radiating malice. Esera held out her arm, stopping her group.

"You must be Komara," said the woman on the mezzanine. "You're shorter than I expected."

"Who are you?" Esera asked.

"Shadday Potkin, Knight of the Republic. Aspar's told us all about you. And you too, Skakoan."

Shadday Potkin? wondered Esera. That wasn't a name from the Temple she remembered much about. Nothing at all, actually. Their paths had never crossed until now.

"Are you here to avenge him?" Murshida asked. His hands tightened on his vibro-axe.

"Avenge? Aspar?" Potkin threw back her head and laughed. "Not in a thousand years! That fool deserves everything he gets. You have my respect, Komara, for humiliating him so. I will kill you quickly for that."

"Well, come on, then," said Esera. Maybe if she died here she'd avoid having to explain her catastrophic failure to Grievous. At this moment, neither life nor death particularly appealed to her.

"So casual!" Potkin remarked. She jumped up, flipping head over heels, and made a perfect three-point landing on the lobby floor. The Knight of the Republic was dressed in something resembling the Republic's Army uniform, but looser-cut. It was made for fighting. Potkin was a Human, lean in figure and coppery in complexion, her black hair tied tightly back in a bun.

"Your threats really don't cut it compared to Grievous," Esera told her. She took up her lightsaber. Potkin turned her nose up.

"You're not taking me seriously, Komara. That'll cost you."

Esera was hurt, tired, and in no mood to play. "Yeah?" she asked.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, girl." Potkin's blue blade leapt to life.

Esera and Purity turned their weapons on, while Murshida's vibro-axe hummed. The magnaguards' electrostaves crackled, and Rahab and Sellero aimed their guns. "You're a little outnumbered, General," said Esera. "Stand aside and we can go our separate ways in peace. Or we can fight."

"You have no idea who you're up against, do you?" asked Potkin. She scowled, and that aura of menace grew around her. Esera took up a ready stance.

The first move went to Potkin. She launched herself at them, a wave of Force energy exploding from her outstretched hand. Esera jumped over it, Purity was right behind her, but everyone else was not so fortunate. They went flying back in all directions. Potkin swung her saber at Esera's, with power she could not match.

She's stronger, of course, thought Esera, dancing away, her bad hand behind her back. Purity came at Potkin from the side, but the Knight easily avoided her. As much practice as they'd done, Purity was still only learning from a mediocre duelist.

Murshida came in, a whirl of red and silver, and Potkin immediately shifted her focus to him. She avoided parrying and instead dodged, ducked, and weaved her way around him; clearly she knew about the cortosis weave.

"I sense your surprise, Skakoan," said Potkin, jumping out of the way of one of his swings. "I know all about you. But do you know anything about me?"

Esera and Purity attacked together, but Potkin soared over their heads and avoided the encirclement. The magnaguards closed in, trying to keep Potkin in a box between all of them, but the knight was as wily as she was skilled, and slipped through every attempt to corner her. Rahab and Sellero were climbing up to the very mezzanine Potkin had come down from; Esera could only hope they were trying to get better shots and not making a run for it.

In and out, Esera and Purity took turns darting, but Shadday Potkin was strong with the Force, far stronger than Esera. This woman had no qualms about killing another thinking, living being; Murshida's usual technique was struggling to find any headway against her. The Skakoan fought using muscle memory alone, making his moves unpredictable for a Jedi used to sensing intentions, but Potkin was ignoring her Jedi abilities entirely. Her style of fighting was purely based on skill and observation. Murshida twitched and his focus sharpened; he'd dosed himself up on his combat drugs. They had Potkin five to one, and they were at a stalemate!

Potkin broke the stalemate a moment later. She jumped over the head of a magnaguard, used the Force to pull it back toward her. With a deft sidestep she got around its electrostaff and chopped the droid in half. The other magnaguard made to defend its fallen brother, but Potkin yanked it towards her, sending it crashing down. She beheaded it with a flick of her wrist, and continued on like nothing had happened.

"Captain, it's time to consider alternatives," Murshida said breathlessly.

"Retreat?" asked Esera. The Skakoan nodded. If he went down, it wouldn't be long until the others did. Up above, Rahab was taking what shots she could with her blaster, but Potkin got in too close to friendlies for her to be effective. Sellero held fire. She'd probably kill them all if she let loose with that monster gun of hers.

"Giving up so soon?" Potkin laughed, diving in to lock blades with Esera, hammering against hers, the brute force attack that Form Two was weakest against. "Upsetting your scheme was frightfully easy, Komara. They're all dead, you know. All those Mandalorians you brought together… right to where I could get them. And now you want to run away after what you've done here?"

Retreat? Esera asked again, silently. This woman had ruined everything! She'd done everything right, she'd swallowed her pride and dealt with Ahsoka Tano and Bo-Katan Kryze, she'd put up with Mandalorian fooleries and pirate nonsense for weeks! And what did she have to show for it? It'd all fallen apart, and Esera didn't even know why... Except for the fact *this* woman was behind it. *No retreat! We can do this! There's still a chance I can save this if she dies here!*

Esera did the only thing she could: she attacked. Potkin smirked, she easily blocked Esera's blows and hammered at her with her own. "I don't know who's more pathetic! You, for being so weak, or Aspar, for managing to lose his face to you!"

I'll kill you, Potkin! Barely holding back a scream, Esera leaped at the woman, but Potkin swatted her blade away. The Knight slashed upward, forcing Esera back- straight into Murshida, who'd been trying to get around her. Murshida pushed her to the ground, and an arc of blazing blue cut through where Esera had been moments before-

And where Murshida's left arm was now.

It was like a bomb had gone off. Esera's ears rang, and she pushed herself up, blinking in the dust kicked up by what surely had to be the depressurization. Murshida still stood, now missing an entire arm. Some kind of seal had closed, saving the rest of the Skakoan, but the suit had sacrificed the rest of his arm to do so. He stood, dazed, and then stumbled.

"Get out of here, Komara," he said, his words slurring by the moment, his focus evaporating. Painkillers and stimulants mixed in his blood, and it was too much for the seventy-two year old Skakoan's body. He toppled over, unconscious.

"You even get your friends killed with you," said Potkin. "I don't know who the white haired one is or where she got that lightsaber, but she's next."

"I am Purity Alpha-" Purity began to say, but Potkin held out her hand, and lifted the biodroid up with the Force, slamming her up and down against the wall and floor.

Again, Esera rushed at the woman, but Potkin casually parried her strike, and dueled her one-handed as she continued to abuse Purity. The dark side called. If she just reached out and took her anger, her fury, and used them, *embraced* them, she could end this in ten seconds. Potkin was sweating, they were wearing her down, Esera could still win! *Take me,* the dark side said, *take me and we'll set everything right!*

"No," Esera growled.

Potkin pulled Purity back, and tossed her at Esera. The biodroid knocked her flat, but to Purity's credit she was on her feet immediately, whirling about to face the oncoming Knight. Distantly, Esera was aware there was much more blaster fire in the lobby; she saw blue flashes coming from high up above. Something exploded, and a chunk of building fell to the lobby floor. Sellero and Rahab were engaging clone troopers. But that was their battle.

Esera and Purity stood at the ready. The day's fighting had sapped Esera of most of her energy, her arms felt heavy, her feet felt leaden, the shot her shoulder had taken ached, the shrapnel cuts she'd suffered felt on fire. How much longer could she keep this up? Potkin was tiring, but she was tiring even faster.

"I've had my fun with you, Komara," said Potkin, her voice dripping with condescension. "Nothing's going to save you this time. I always knew Olor Callo's apprentice would turn out to be useless."

The dark side screamed in Esera's ears, it clawed at her heart. Her blood boiled in fury, her right hand spasmed and clenched. *No, I will not fall,* she told herself. *I will not! You don't know a damn thing, Potkin! None of you do!*

Potkin rushed at them; Purity and Esera split up to attack from either side. The Knight dropped down and slid beneath their lightsabers as they swung, she struck upward and stabbed Purity straight through her middle. Wrenching her lightsaber out, Potkin rounded on Esera. Their blade locked once more, and Potkin punched her in the face. Esera stumbled back, her vision flickering dark, and a blast of Force energy slammed her against the wall.

Purity, thought Esera. The biodroid wasn't dead. She looked more surprised than anything. Esera would die from a stab like that. The world seemed to have slowed to a crawl; Potkin strode towards her, the Force rippling with power around her, each footfall taking a lifetime to complete. The magnaguards were out, Murshida was down, Purity was hurt, and she was being crushed against a wall. She'd been here before, though. And just like last time, Esera knew what might save her.

She reached out through the Force, up and away from the dome, to the ship sitting on a landing pad, surrounded by clones. They swore and jumped back as *Whirlwind*'s engines came to life. The ship lifted off the pad, and dipped her nose. She rumbled forward, her blasters shattering glass and melting steel as she advanced into the spaceport, smashing anything between her and Esera. *Come to me!* Esera called, and *Whirlwind* came.

Potkin froze mid-step as she noticed the cacophony, uncomprehending of what was happening. Crashing through floors, columns, stairs, walkways, and finally mezzanine balconies was *Whirlwind,* guns blazing.

Esera guided the ship to Potkin. *Kill her,* she thought. Against guns that powerful, a lightsaber wouldn't do much, and her enemy knew that. Potkin's face twisted into a sneer of rage, but she let Esera drop to the ground and bolted for the very basement Esera had arrived through. She pushed herself up, ignoring the pain throughout her body.

"Everyone, on!" Esera yelled, as *Whirlwind* spun around in the lobby, her wings crushing kiosks and her engine exhaust heated up glass until it glowed. She touched down and dropped her ramp. Rahab jumped down, jetpack firing to stop her fall, while Sellero scrambled for the half-pulverized staircase.

By now, the headless magnaguard was upright, and had its brother's upper half in its arms. They boarded while Esera helped Purity up. "We will not be leaving Mister Murshida, will we?" asked Purity.

"Of course not," said Esera. With Rahab's help, they pulled Murshida up the ramp. Sellero was last aboard, huffing and puffing.

"Was she the one behind this?" Sellero asked.

"Yes," said Esera.

The pirate princess turned about, leveled her pistol at the basement stairwell, and pulled the trigger. A blast of energy annihilated everything in its path, and the lobby floor caved in where the underground supports had been blown away. Sellero's mechanical gloves hissed and the air around them shimmered as little vents atop her wrists opened.

"I hope I got her," Sellero said, her eyes wet but expression hard.

"If you didn't, this will. *Whirlwind,* burn this place down!" Esera ordered. Even as she climbed up to the bridge, *Whirlwind* sped off through the tunnel of wreckage she'd made, looped around, and laid waste to the spaceport and everything in it. Ventress's ship was gone, and so was a Z-95, she saw, before it was all consumed in flames.

"What kind of ship is this?" Sellero asked, quietly.

"A beast," said Rahab. She fell into one of the passenger seats, as *Whirlwind* broke for orbit. According to *Whirlwind,* communications had gone down an hour ago. Only an hour, and everything had changed for Mandalore.

The optical sensors quickly homed in on *Encounter*. She was exchanging fire with the *Tector*, her shields flickering, fires burning, atmosphere venting, but guns still firing. The *Tector* hadn't even been scratched. "Voyan, you *idiot*!" she yelled, keying up the comms. *Whirlwind*'s powerful array managed to get a connection, despite ComFast's apparent jamming.

"*Captain!*" said the static-laced voice of Voyan. Esera was filled with a profound relief. "*I told you, Shau, that was her blowing up the spaceport*-"

"Shut up!" she said. "Are you insane? Don't answer, we're short on time. Target the beskar mines, maximum firepower, as close to Base Delta Zero as you can get in a single salvo on that grid coordinate," said Esera.

"*Are you sure?*"

"Yes. We won't get another chance at this. The moment you have confirmed impact, get out of there!"

"*We won't have time to pick you up*-"

"I've got a hyperdrive too, you moron! Now do as I say!"

"*Orders understood.*" That was all Voyan had to say. *Encounter* turned away from the star destroyer, and the prow guns rained hellfire on the beskar mines. Esera, Sellero, and now Rahab watched from *Whirlwind*'s windows as the red lances came down from above and vanished below the southern horizon, hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away. Then, *Encounter* spun about again, and vanished into hyperspace, leaving a lake of lava as the only mark she'd been here. How many people had been working down there? How many had been living around it? Guilt rose in Esera's heart. *I never thought I'd give a Base Delta Zero order,* she thought. *Even a small one like that.* Something of this mission's objective had been salvaged. The Republic had been denied a small but powerful strategic asset. And an entire people had been denied their cultural heritage… at least until the lava cooled, and they could drill through it.

"Where's our ship, Komara?" asked Rahab, taking off her helmet. She looked as bad as Esera felt. *Whirlwind* pinged a communications request to the Tenau Gunrunner, but got no response. As they reached orbit and engaged the cloak, a brief scan of the Dusala village revealed the worst: most of the village had been replaced by a smoking crater, centered on the Tenau ship's landing site. Rahab said nothing. She dropped into a passenger seat, and buried her face in her hands.

"Um…" Sellero cleared her throat. "What about *my* ship?" she asked.

Pride of Sellero was docked with the *Tector*. Under the cloak's stealth field, they got closer, and discovered a few dozen bodies had been ejected on a decaying orbit. Sellero was ashen-faced. "My crew," she said, in a hollow voice.

Esera hadn't felt this much darkness in *Whirlwind* since her name had been *Scimitar*.

Planet MR-68173B was no place for the living, Tarkin had decided. When the shuttle pilot had called it a tomb, he'd had no idea how correct he'd been. The very air on this planet tasted stale, even when the wind blew. And that wind brought nothing with it, it just moaned and howled across the desolation of the surface, an endless cold plain of sand and dust in the endless shadowy twilight of the faint white dwarf sun above.

Desolate, except for the *actual* tomb.

The Rakatans had built something here, quarried out of the local bedrock: a great drum with three angular prongs reaching to the heavens. The entrance had been sealed with a block of stone, they'd had to blow it up to get inside. Maul, Aspar, and Greejatus were snooping around in there now.

While Tarkin and his Red Guard could have been in there, they were instead sheltering from the cold in the shuttle, listening to the pilot's protests over the choice of vehicle.

"…this ship seemed perfectly sound at the dock back on Coruscant, my lord, but all manner of problems have appeared in the last day. I would like to have a serious talk with the ground crew chief back at the hangar. Something is seriously wrong with this shuttle's systems. I cannot believe Chancellor Palpatine was flying in this thing, my lord."

"What problems?" Tarkin asked, as he did his best to ignore the biting chill seeping into the cabin from outside. "We arrived safely, didn't we?"

"The sensor suite and analyzer programs are completely haywire, my lord. Once we got within a few thousand kilometers of the planet, the life-scanner went off the charts, and then went dead, over and over. It'd still be doing it now if I hadn't turned it off. Not to mention, the computer thinks that star up there is over three hundred billion years old, which is impossible. The readings are all wrong."

Something flickered on the edge of Tarkin's vision, outside the cockpit window. No one else reacted to anything, so he ignored it. This had happened a dozen times now, since they landed. "What about the biochemical hazard scanner?" he asked. "Have you gotten any readings on if there's something in the air?"

"The computer says this is the cleanest air it's ever seen, my lord," the clone said. "But if you ask me, it's staler than a cruiser packed with a full legion on a two-month long deployment."

Going down onto an unexplored planet was risky. Who knew what unknown pathogens lurked in wait? But the planet was visibly dead. They hadn't found a speck of organic matter they hadn't brought themselves in the day they'd been here.

"Tear this ship apart when we get back to Coruscant, pilot," Tarkin said. "I have no patience for malfunctioning machines."

"With pleasure, my lord." The clone bowed his head, and tapped an enthusiastic note on his datapad. But his smile faded, and he looked around, over his shoulder, at the bleak and barren emptiness stretching on forever. He shook his head. "If I might ask… Never mind, Chancellor. It's nothing."

Tarkin raised an eyebrow, and the clone instantly folded.

"It's a feeling, my lord. Like there's something out there, watching. Not just out there, but *close,* like it's reaching out, about to touch me. But I turn around, and…" He gestured out at the nothingness beyond the cockpit windows. "It's just us out here."

So, he feels it too. Perhaps we all are. And why shouldn't we? This was a Rakatan planet, once. He may be seeing things, too.

"This was once the stronghold of a terrible alien empire, pilot," Tarkin told him. "There are many things we cannot understand. They are products of an inhuman intelligence beyond our comprehension."

"I'll keep that in mind, my lord," the pilot said, looking chastised.

As the hours went by, the feeling grew worse. It was as if there was something nearby, watching, waiting, creeping closer, like a predator about to strike. What information existed about the Infinite Empire and its deeds was scant, but they had used Force-based technology. Tarkin couldn't deny the Jedi and Sith were tapping into *something*. Perhaps that was what they felt here, some kind of residual energy. But after twenty-five thousand years? What power had once gripped this planet?

There was movement at the tomb entrance. Real movement, not imagined. "*My lord!*" Greejatus cried over the communicator, waving at the shuttle from the tomb. "*Come and see!*"

Tarkin waved the Red Guard forward, leaving the pilot to his malfunctioning ship's computer. He pulled his cloak about him and his hood up and made his way over, ignoring the urge to rush as the icy wind pierced through fabric and flesh and into his bones. Inside, the three men had set up glaring floodlights; Maul and Aspar were snooping around the sarcophagus. A whole litany of strange items littered the chamber, perhaps offerings for the dead alien's journey to its afterlife.

"Chancellor," Maul said, giving him a nod.

"My lord." Aspar bowed. "We have made an amazing discovery."

"And what might this discovery be?" asked Tarkin.

"This isn't a tomb," said Maul. He tapped a hand against the sarcophagus. "There's something alive in here. Too shielded for scanners, but we can sense it."

"It's a holding chamber of some sorts," Greejatus said, in a voice quiet and awed. "This must be a Rakatan stasis pod. And there's one inside."

"There's so many interesting things in here," Maul went on. He picked up a long, narrow case. "A whole stash of mindspears! Sidious mustn't have known just how much was here, or he'd have looted it long ago."

"Mindspears?" Tarkin raised an eyebrow, not impressed.

"A memory transfer device," Greejatus said. "Very much sought after by my late master. He'd be having a fit if he'd known all this had been here the whole time." The dark side adept shuddered at the thought.

"I can only imagine." Maul smiled, somehow looking wistful and devious at once. A flicker caught Tarkin's eye, and he tried not to look into a dark corner of the chamber.

"That's all incredibly fascinating," said Tarkin, not bothering to keep the aggravation out of his voice, "but what does this have to do with the weapon we came here for? Shall we wake up this Rakatan and ask him?"

"Why not?" Aspar asked. "It's a once-in-a-millennium chance, my lord. I don't think anyone's ever found a living Rakatan, not since Darth Revan's day, at least."

"Who knows what diseases it has?" Greejatus replied. "That's how the Infinite Empire fell, some kind of plague tore through them until they were too few to control the slave races."

"I doubt any disease tailored for the Rakatans will affect us," said Maul. "I say we open it, and at the very least get him to activate our holocron."

"Then do it," said Tarkin.

Maul held out a hand over the stasis pod, and stared down at it. His eyes narrowed, his jaw locked, and his leather gloves creaked as his fist clenched and unclenched. A low growl rose in his throat, and his face twisted into a sneer. At last, the stasis pod came to life. Red lights spread across it like veins of blood, and the top cracked open into two pieces, smoothly falling away to the sides. A body stirred within.

Out of the pod reached a three-fingered hand, and up came a long, conical head; two beady eyes stuck out on stalks from either side. The Rakatan blinked in the light, but its face contorted when it locked its gaze on those who had awakened it.

The alien spat something at them in its language, the first words of Rakatan spoken in millennia. The Red Guard took a ready stance, leveling their force pikes.

Maul held up the holocron, levitating it in his hand. The alien's eyes widened, and it recoiled. *This creature does not look well,* Tarkin thought. Its pale green skin glistened, its limbs shook, its breathing was unsteady. *It's been in that stasis pod for a reason…*

The Rakatan croaked out more words in its forgotten tongue, and tried to climb out of the pod, but began to cough. Drops of dark liquid splattered on the floor. A strange, acrid smell began to fill the room, and the alien's glistening skin began to sag before their very eyes.

"I told you that thing was diseased!" Greejatus hissed, backing away.

"Maul, get it to open the holocron!" said Tarkin.

Maul shoved the holocron toward the Rakatan, but it let out an alarmed cry. The former Sith apprentice was having none of it, and seized the creature by the wrist, and forced its hand onto the holocron. Immediately, the little pyramid's glyphs came alive, now with a symbol Tarkin hadn't seen last time floating above its apex. *So, Maul's hunch was right!*

The alien let out a horrible cry, as its skin disintegrated into a bloody mess under Maul's grip. The red blood mixed with something else, something putrid and vile, the color of rot. Maul let go of the Rakatan and took two steps back, shaking the globs of goop off his glove, revulsion etched on his face.

"It's melting," Tarkin said, both disgusted and amazed. If it had been a Human, he might have thought it a terrible way to die. The Rakatan collapsed back into the pod, decaying by the moment. The smell alone was enough to drive everyone back. Almost everyone.

Aspar appeared at the pod, with a hair-thin filament glowing like a beam of light held between his fingers. The box of mindspears was open on the floor.

"What are you doing!?" Greejatus cried.

"This is an opportunity the Galaxy will never have again," said Aspar. "I'm doing what I must."

"Aspar, you fool, you don't-" Maul's words went unheeded, and the masked man stuck one end of the mindspear into the dying Rakatan's head, and threaded the other through the eyehole of his mask. There was nothing to signify anything had occurred, but Aspar stumbled back, and tripped over a pile of *stuff* the Rakatans had left behind. The alien was left to fall apart into a pile of rotting sludge; even its skeleton crumbled.

No one approached the Knight. They all stood still, waiting for him to move. *It transfers memories, Maul said,* thought Tarkin. *How many? How strongly? What if Aspar is gone, and that Rakatan is in there now? Or someone who thinks he's that Rakatan?* Maul was having the same thoughts: he'd taken a fighting stance, while Greejatus backed away toward the Red Guards. They too were ready for a fight.

Aspar groaned as he slowly sat up, a hand held to his mask. "My name is Ardabur Aspar. I am a Knight of the Republic. Yes… that's who I am. Yes, yes it is."

"Well, the alien's memories didn't overwhelm him, at least," Greejatus said, relaxing.

"I am feeling quite overwhelmed… Janus Greejatus, wasn't it? You are Janus Greejatus. One of Sidious's lackeys. Whoever Sidious was. A small fish in a big ocean, to use a Mon Cala phrase. There are far worse things than Sith lords." Aspar looked at them all, and then at the opened stasis pod. "Or *were.* That was all a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"Over a thousand generations," Maul said. He shook his head. "You're a fool, Aspar. Mindspears have no buffer. You could have wiped your own mind with the Rakatan's memories."

"I think I did. Partially." Aspar shrugged, and looked around at the pile of junk he sat amongst. His eyes fixed on one cylindrical object, the size of a man's forearm. "I can't recall my master's name, or their face, nor the Jedi who taught me, or the friends I had in youth… A small price to pay for what I've gained, I suppose."

"And what is that?" Tarkin asked.

Aspar picked up the cylinder he'd been staring at. He held it out to Tarkin. "Here you go, my lord."

"What is this?" Tarkin asked, taking the cylinder.

"Your weapon."

Is this a joke? wondered Tarkin, frowning at the object. It felt completely solid, and had a dark, smoky, glassy surface, like it'd been carved from obsidian.

"*That* stick is the weapon Sidious wrote of?" Maul looked incredulous, but beneath that was a sense of wariness even Tarkin picked up on. This was a man who was worried he'd just outlived his usefulness. Every few seconds, Maul's eyes darted over to the Red Guards.

"It's a seed," said Aspar. "And like any seed, it'll need to be grown."

"What does it do, once it's grown?" asked Tarkin.

Greejatus huffed, looking unamused as Tarkin felt. "Does it turn into a flower? Will it make our enemies sneeze? Don't tell me we came all this way for a mere seed."

For a few long moments, Aspar was silent. He looked at the stasis pod. "Our friend in the pod had his memories censored before they put him in. Neither he nor I know what it does." He looked at Maul. "It's a good thing you activated that holocron... I've got an idea of how to unlock it. It belonged to our friend's liege-lord. Just touching it would have earned him an execution. All the secrets of that warlord are in there, including this seed's function, I'm sure."

"That'll have to do," Tarkin said. Wisely, Aspar had assured Maul he still had work to do, and Maul no longer looked like he was ready to fight his way out of the chamber. Tarkin held the seed gingerly. In his hands was the artifact of an alien civilization long-dead, which had left little to future civilizations but tales of terror and mysterious technology still unable to be understood. Another flicker caught his attention, coming from nowhere and vanishing into nowhere. This time, Greejatus's eyes darted over to it too. Were these apparitions growing stronger, that two people could see them at once? Tarkin cleared his throat. "Aspar, what did the Rakatans take with them when they left this place?"

"Records, tools, materials, arms and armor, all manner of resources they thought they'd need for their eventual reconquest," Aspar said. "They didn't intend for their retreat to be permanent. That one was sure they'd be back for him with a cure."

"But they didn't take this seed with them." Tarkin's skin crawled, and the sense that there was something just over his shoulder grew until it was all he could do not to turn around. "In a time of need, the Rakatans left this weapon behind rather than take it back to their home world."

Knight, Sith, and adept all locked their eyes on the seed in Tarkin's hands. It began to dawn on them that they'd found something even the Rakatans had feared.

Author's notes and responses: Wow, the big 5-0! And if I'm not mistaken we're passing the 500K word mark too... I really can't pace well or conserve detail, can I? I apologize for the extreme length of this chapter (and story). I was having a lot of fun and got carried away; I hope you could at least enjoy it too. I also apologize to Bo Katan stans. I gave her an ending echoing of another surprise shooting in another space show that starred Katee Sackhoff. Speaking of franchise references, I'm not even gonna hide it: Valued Reviewer Fourhand is right, the ZZ Gundam crew showed up in this arc. And Gundam enthusiasts will notice that four mobile suits made cameos in this chapter (though Zeta is serving as two machines by the name of Zeta in one). As you might gather, I didn't have many warm feelings for ZZ Gundam's cast. I was watching ZZ when I outlined this arc in October, lel. God, what an awful show. Don't waste your time on it if you liked Zeta Gundam.

Anyways, a lot happened action-wise in this chapter, and we didn't really get to the fallout of what just went down. People made mistakes, people got wrecked. There qill be questions asked. Tarkin's field trip's findings may also be a wee bit important. I'll leave you guys to speculate from there. Aspar haters are tearing out their hair right now. Onto responses:

To Valued Reviewer ErrorPleaseReload: Your comments mean a lot to me, and I'm glad you figured out what I was doing with Esera. Hearing that I inspire others is the biggest compliment I could get.

To Valued Reviewer Inoeth: Sanya's still on Esera's blacklist, sorry! But yes, I've been meaning to get back to what the Jedi are up to on Coruscant, it's just that this Mandalore arc had a lot more moving parts than I anticipated when I began writing it. Next chapter.

To Valued Reviewer Beltrik: These Mandalorians are ridiculous, aren't they? Well, they *were* ridiculous! Haha! Get it? Because they're all DEAD now!

To Valued Reviewer Gabriel: One day I will shill an actual book I've written in these comments, so if you want way to financially contribute to my "art," that'll be it. One day. But if Hamas bows to Disney lawyers, then I dare not even dream of making a penny on Star Wars.

That's all for now, folks. As always, shout-out to Corshy1 for being my beta reader. See you in May!

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